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The Phallus Monologues: A Study of the Closet and its  
Influence on the Homosocial/Homosexual Continuum

Los monólogos del falo: estudio del armario y su influencia en  
el continuo homosocial/homosexual

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## **Abstract**

Our society has always been shaped by one principle that had, for the most part, never been questioned until the 20<sup>th</sup> century: the distinction between male and female. For instance, the first thing we need to know about a newborn baby is whether it is a girl or a boy, and that distinction lasts for the entirety of the individual's existence. The presence of a binary system has subsequently led to the creation of a patriarchal system in which men play the role of the dominant gender whereas women are dominated by the phallus. The role that gender plays in shaping our identity has created certain sets of gendered behaviors that rule our lives and decide who and how we are. Those who do not comply with those patterns of behavior are then regarded as dangerous beings, such is the case of homosexuals.

Homosexuality means dissent and transgression inasmuch as the homosexual individual is refusing to remain a member of our supposedly homogeneous society. The purpose of this paper is to explore the origins and the dynamics of that transgression, and the ways in which male homosexual individuals come to terms with their sexuality, the politics of their gender, and the experience of coming out of the closet. The binary system that rules our society will remain a haunting presence throughout the paper, shaping the way the analyzed characters understand their own identities.

## **Resumen**

Nuestra sociedad siempre ha estado marcada por un principio cuya validez nunca ha sido cuestionada hasta el siglo XX: la diferenciación entre varón y hembra. Por ejemplo, lo primero que necesitamos saber acerca de un recién nacido es si es un chico o una chica. Dicha separación de género se mantiene durante el resto de la vida del individuo. Por ende, la presencia de un sistema binario ha derivado en la creación de un sistema patriarcal en el cual los hombres asumen el rol del género dominante mientras que las mujeres son dominadas por el falo. La importancia del género a la hora de moldear nuestra identidad ha llevado a la creación de ciertas pautas de comportamiento determinadas por el género del individuo que dominan nuestras vidas y deciden quién y cómo somos. Quienes no cumplen con los ya mencionados estándares de comportamiento son, por lo tanto, considerados un peligro, como es el caso de los homosexuales.

La homosexualidad es sinónimo de disenso y transgresión puesto que el individuo homosexual se niega a seguir siendo un miembro de una sociedad supuestamente homogénea. El objetivo de nuestro estudio es explorar los orígenes y las dinámicas de dicha transgresión,

así como las formas en las que los individuos homosexuales aceptan y asumen su sexualidad, las relaciones de género y la experiencia que supone salir del armario. El sistema binario que domina nuestra sociedad será una presencia constante a lo largo de nuestro análisis, influyendo en la manera en la que los personajes que estudiaremos entienden sus propias identidades.

### **Keywords**

- Homosexuality
- Homosociality
- Closet
- Gender
- Masculinity

### **Palabras clave**

- Homosexualidad
- Homosocialidad
- Armario
- Género
- Masculinidad

## Table of contents

1. Introduction	1
2. André Aciman's <i>Call Me by Your Name</i>	3
2.1. The closeted truth	3
2.2. The aesthetics of power	23
3. Ursula K. Le Guin's <i>The Left Hand of Darkness</i>	36
3.1. What we talk about when we talk about aliens	36
3.2. The ultimate frontier; overcoming the fear of the Other	47
3.3. Coming out by coming back	57
4. Conclusion	63
5. Works Cited	67

## 1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to carry out a thorough analysis of the homosocial/homosexual continuum and its interaction with the space of the closet in two different American novels: André Aciman's *Call Me by Your Name* (2007) and Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969). The closet has always influenced the lives of homosexual individuals inasmuch as remaining inside the closet both imprisons and protects them. In other words, existing inside the space of the closet is restrictive because it cancels the individual's identity and freedom, but it is at the same time a means to escape social prejudices and the Lacanian gaze that commodifies and labels homosexuals as mad, devious, and evil.

Although the closet could be argued to function as a haven for the homosexual individual to prevent social stigmas from affecting his life, its ultimate purpose is to force homosexuals to remain hidden. Our goal, then, is to explore the multiple ways in which the closet may be harmful for the protagonists of the discussed texts and how its presence determines both their personalities, the opinions they hold, and the interactions they have with each other.

This paper will be dealing with the coming-out process, a moment of freedom in which the homosexual individual is seemingly able to seize control over his or her life, as well as the different elements that may prevent it from happening. In a post-Stonewall context marked by third-wave feminism and the significance of the different LGBTQ movements, the act of coming out of the closet has gained even more importance in our society. The alternative ways in which Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness*—published three months before the June, 1969 Stonewall Riots—and André Aciman's *Call Me by Your Name* present the homosexual experience will allow us to draw a clear distinction between the life of the homosexual individual before and after escaping the closet.

Both novels portray homosexuality as a process throughout which the characters are able to identify a latent same-sex desire that has remained unaddressed for most of their lives. The subsequent evolution is triggered both by the realization of said latent homosexuality and the homosocial relationships the characters establish with one another. So as to be able to fully explore the confusion, doubts, prejudices and preconceived ideas of gender and sexuality that both the characters and the societies presented in the novels have, we will turn to authors such as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Judith Butler, Luce Irigaray, or Gloria Anzaldúa. Sedgwick's ideas about the importance of the closet and the homosocial/homosexual continuum will be highly

important in the discussion of both novels. Judith Butler provides this paper with insightful analyses of the politics of gender and how its performance shapes the concepts of masculinity and femininity as well as their expected patterns of behavior. Butler supports her arguments by quoting Luce Irigaray and her take on the idea of phallogocentrism and its influence on the commodification of female individuals as inferior to males. Lastly, Anzaldúa's idea of *mestizaje* and her analysis of the relationship between culture, identity, religion and gender and their transgressive power will be especially important in the discussion of dichotomies and the existing physical and ideological frontiers that separate the characters in the two analyzed novels. On top of these ideas, this paper will address issues such as the labelling of the homosexual individual as mad, the nature/culture dichotomy, or the interaction between beauty, art and pleasure.

Finally, it is also important to note that the paper will use the word "homosexual" instead of terms such as "gay" or "queer." This choice comes as a consequence of the lack of a satisfactory rule for choosing between these terms (Sedgwick, *Epistemology* 16); although the word "gay" has been used mainly in the post-Stonewall era, the term "homosexual" may be less restrictive insofar as "gay" has been traditionally used to refer to men, which would not suit the purpose of this paper since most of the characters in *The Left Hand of Darkness* are androgynous. The word "homosexual" seems more inclusive, especially when taking into account that some of the characters we will be dealing with cannot be said to be homosexuals due to different elements that prevent homosocial bonds to turn into same-sex relationships.

## 2. André Aciman's *Call Me by Your Name*

According to Stacey D'Erasmus's review of the novel, André Aciman's *Call Me by Your Name* (2007) "is as much a story of paradise found as it is of paradise lost" (D'Erasmus). Aciman's story is one of desire, sexuality and self-discovery as much as it is about pain and loss. Hence, this section of the paper aims to analyze the ways in which the closet is negotiated in the text as well as the ways in which same-sex love may overcome social prejudices through art, sex, desire and power.

### 2.1. The closeted truth

Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Americans grew used to going to Europe as part of the Grand Tour, an overseas experience during which American tourists would visit countries such as Italy, France, or Switzerland. American literature has a wide variety of texts in which the plot revolves around one or more characters travelling to other countries in order to get to know themselves. The characters that star in these journeys range from the existentialist characters in Ernest Hemingway's stories such as *The Sun Also Rises* (1926) or *The Garden of Eden* (published posthumously in 1986) to American bachelors and middle and upper class individuals that move to Europe in search of a new morality and new experiences such as the protagonists of Henry James's *Roderick Hudson* (1875) or *Daisy Miller* (1878). In his analysis of *Daisy Miller*, Ryan Stuart Lowe says that "it was safe to say that Winterbourne and Daisy were not the only American travelers abroad. Between guidebooks and tour guides and travel literature, railways and steamboats and hotels, Americans were adapting the Grand Tour into a middle-class way of life" (33). The truth is that through sightseeing, tourism, and meeting other people, the American tourists that appear in novels such as the ones just mentioned undergo a series of changes that allow them to not only get to truly know who they are, but to also discover a reality that goes beyond the imprisoning space to which they were confined while residing in the United States.

One of the best examples of American characters leaving their country so as to come to know themselves through a realization of their own sexuality may be James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* (1956). The protagonist of Baldwin's novel moves to Paris to come to terms with his homosexuality, a process he describes in the following manner: "I wanted to find myself. I think now that if I had had any intimation that the self I was going to find would turn out to be only the same self from which I had spent so much time in flight, I would have stayed at home" (24). André Aciman's *Call Me by Your Name* follows the tradition of literature that

deals with journeys that are “part of a larger, still continuing, historical pattern of gay people leaving home for sojourns in places they feel freer precisely because they are foreigners there” (Vanita 104). On the one hand, Aciman’s work is a physical journey in which the protagonists move to a foreign country where they find sexual and cultural freedom, allowing the self to explore and experience his or her own identity far from the boundaries imposed by American society. On the other hand, said journey is a *tour de force*, a process of self-realization through the power of the body and of the individual’s sexual self-discovery.

*Call Me by Your Name* is the coming-of-age story of Elio, a 17 year old Italian-American Jewish boy living in an unnamed Italian coastal village during the 1980s. Elio and his family could be described as middle or upper class, quite privileged and cultivated, with classical music, art, literature and philosophy being a huge influence on the family’s daily life and conversations. As a matter of fact, the novel’s portrayal of the relation between highbrow culture, aestheticism and pleasure suits the plot’s Wildean nature in the sense that it imitates and pays homage to different elements that were present in most of Oscar Wilde’s works, which will be analyzed later on in this paper. Elio’s father is a university professor who hosts young academics each summer in order to help them revise and finish their manuscripts before publication. Oliver, a 24 year old Jewish American scholar who teaches at Columbia University, is the houseguest during the summer in which the novel takes place.

It is Oliver’s arrival which ultimately turns this coming-of-age story into a coming out story. *Call Me by Your Name* deals with the homosexual relationship between Elio and Oliver, but it is also a story of knowing and not knowing, of getting to know oneself through the Other, and ways in which homosexuals negotiate their same-sex desire inside and outside the space of the closet, a “fundamental feature of social life” that shapes the identities and lives of homosexuals (Sedgwick, *Epistemology* 68). George Chauncey defines the closet as the spatial metaphor typically used to characterize homosexual life before coming out (qtd. in *Winning* 50). Chauncey adds that the origin of the concept can be traced to “the notion of ‘skeleton in the closet’ and thus evokes the notions of secrecy, shame, abjection and surveillance” (qtd. in *Winning* 50). When discussing same-sex love and secrecy, knowledge—or rather the lack thereof—is a key notion according to Sedgwick in her analysis of homosexuality in the late Victorian period: “By the end of the nineteenth century ... it had become fully current ... that knowledge meant sexual knowledge, and secret sexual secrets” (*Epistemology* 73). It is appropriate then to apply Sedgwick’s words about the fin-de-siècle British society to the



portrayal of Elio's coming out process since *Call Me by Your Name* is Elio's quest to apprehend his and Oliver's sexual secrets.

These sexual secrets and the struggle of knowing and not knowing are what ultimately comprise the idea of the "closeted truth." The closeted truth—defined by Sedgwick as a "performance initiated as such by the speech act of a silence" (*Epistemology* 3)—leads to secrecy and paranoia in the homosexual individual, but is also turned into a negotiation of power, a game that Elio describes as his and Oliver's "little Ping-Pong game" (18) where the rules are "not knowing, not-not knowing, not-not-not knowing ... and if you can't say 'yes,' don't say 'no,' say 'later'" (18). D.A. Miller opines that secrecy is the "subjective practice in which the oppositions of private/public, inside/outside, subject/object are established. The phenomenon of the 'open secret' does not ... bring about the collapse of those binarisms and their ideological effects, but rather attests to their fantasmatic recovery" (qtd. in Sedgwick, *Epistemology* 67). Hence, the open secret, which is never addressed but rather silenced or closeted, does not in this case simply attest to Elio's and Oliver's homosexuality but it also reinforces the existence of the inside/outside and knowledge/lack of knowledge binary oppositions. Therefore, silence is part of the ideas of the open secret and the glass closet (a concept that will be explained shortly), but it is a quite complex concept as well insofar as it works in two different ways. Namely, the novel presents silence as both dangerous and beneficial to the ensuring of the open secret, with Elio claiming that being unable to express himself from a linguistic point of view could reveal the truth:

Because I didn't know how to speak in code, I didn't know how to speak at all. I felt like a deaf and dumb person who can't even use sign language. I stammered all manner of things so as not to speak my mind. So long as I had breath to put words in my mouth, I could more or less carry it off. Otherwise, the silence between us would probably give me away. Silence would expose me. (17)

However, Elio also says that what is certain to expose him is his "struggle to overcome [silence] in front of others" (17). As a result, Elio can be neither fully inside nor outside the closet but in a constant state of in-betweenness, trying to overcome the boundaries that are placed both by themselves and by society between him and Oliver. This is better illustrated when Elio starts coming to terms with his sexual attraction towards Oliver:

Today, the pain, the stoking, the thrill of someone new, the promise of so much bliss hovering a fingertip away, the fumbling around people I might misread and don't want

to lose and must second-guess at every turn ... the screens I put up as though between me and the world there were not just one but layers of rice-paper sliding doors, the urge to scramble and unscramble what was never really coded in the first place—all these started the summer Oliver came into our house. (10)

Elio's description of the fragility of the aforementioned boundaries—which are made out of rice-paper—shows how the space of the closet may not be as inescapable as it may seem at first, but rather that the closet is indeed what Sedgwick calls a “glass closet,” defined as “the swirls of totalizing knowledge-power that circulate so violently around any but the most openly acknowledged gay male identity” (*Epistemology* 164). If the closet is made out of rice-paper or glass, then the secret that it keeps is open or at least not totally closeted. It is important to take into account the fact that the novel's narrator is Elio himself, as well as how the book is almost like Elio's personal diary, in which he describes all his thoughts, emotions and sexual impulses. Even though Elio seemingly admits his homosexuality in his narration, thus coming out in the eye of the reader, he never truly comes out publicly. It is also interesting to note that neither the word “homosexual” nor the words “gay” or “queer” are mentioned in the entire novel, revealing Elio's struggle to actually put his feelings and sexual identity into words. However, the novel is written in a way in which using these words is not necessary, not simply because we have access to Elio's memories, dreams and fears but also because the novel is dealing with “the love that dare not speak its name,” an idea that Oscar Wilde took from a poem written by his lover Lord Alfred Douglas and that has been traditionally regarded as a description of homosexual love (Bozorth 203).

The novel also illustrates the secrecy between Oliver and Elio by other means, such as the fact that both of them are Jewish. When realizing that Oliver is wearing a “gold necklace and the Star of David with a golden mezuzah on his neck” (19), Elio claims that “staring at his neck with its star and telltale amulet was like staring at something timeless, ancestral, immortal in me, in him, in both of us” (19). Oliver does not hide his Judaism, unlike Elio's family: “We were not conspicuous Jews. We wore our Judaism as people do almost everything in the world: under the shirt, not hidden, but tucked away. ‘Jews of discretion,’ to use my mother's words” (19). In spite of the differing attitudes of Oliver and Elio's family, Jewishness is also a bond

between Elio and Oliver. After discussing the work of Jewish poet Paul Celan<sup>1</sup> with Oliver, Elio says: “Me Jewish, Celan Jewish, Oliver Jewish—we were in a half ghetto, half oasis, in an otherwise cruel and unflinching world ... where we misread no one and no one misjudges us, where one person simply knows the other and knows him so thoroughly that to be taken away from such intimacy is *galut*, the Hebrew word for exile and dispersal” (49). The Jewish experience brings Elio and Oliver together, but it also reflects the secrecy and status as outcasts that both characters share in society. Elio remains isolated inside the closet due to the impossibility of others knowing his secret, whereas Oliver needs to leave the United States to be free.

As a matter of fact, that Oliver lives the Jewish experience naturally is made even more interesting by where he was born. Elio argues that Oliver’s attitude towards Judaism comes as a consequence of his having lived “long enough in small towns in New England to know what it felt like to be the odd Jew out” (20). Therefore, Oliver is “okay with himself, the way he was okay with his body, with his looks, with his antic backhand, with his choice of books, music, films, friends” (20). As mentioned at the beginning of this section, coming out stories often reflect the difference between America and other countries from a moral point of view. Tracing Oliver’s origins to New England can create an instant relation between homosexuality and the old Puritan values that defined same-sex love as going against God’s will. The mention of New England reinforces the role that Italy plays in Elio and Oliver’s love story, as the further away the characters are from the United States, the freer they seem to be, especially when taking into account how different Mediterranean countries such as Italy or Spain approach sexuality in comparison to the United States. *Call Me by Your Name* shows how Italy is a much more accepting and relaxed place when it comes to sexuality by placing the coming out experience of both Oliver and Elio there. Apart from the different approaches towards sexuality as such, the fact that Oliver had lived in small New England towns is also important insofar as the attitude towards homosexuality in big cities is totally different from how it is seen in small towns in most countries. The concept of a small town is associated with a close-knit community where everyone may know each other’s secrets<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Although born in Romania, Paul Celan (1920-1970) was a Jewish German poet. He lived through World War II, being forced to live in ghettos and even spending some time in a concentration camp. Among other themes, Celan’s poetry dealt with exile and the trauma of the Holocaust and the war.

<sup>2</sup> In terms of how the United States understands the idea of community in contrast to countries like Italy and Spain, a good introductory example would be the concept of the fiesta in Ernest Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises*. The

Although secrecy is also present in some of the features that comprise Oliver's identity, he seems freer than Elio. That Elio feels sexually attracted towards Oliver is never denied nor challenged throughout the book as readers are able to identify Elio's sexual orientation from the very beginning. The glass closet establishes a continuum of knowledge and lack of knowledge in which Elio moves from one extreme to the other depending on his feelings towards Oliver and his performance. Moreover, living inside the closet, that is, within the knowledge continuum, is torturous for Elio inasmuch as the impossibility of telling others alienates him and turns him into an outcast. There are several references to Elio's lack of strong friendships and his tendency to stay home either reading or playing the piano. Even though the novel never gives readers more insight into Elio's relationship with other characters apart from Oliver, Elio's self-imposed isolation can be related to his impossibility to reveal his open secret: "There was no one to speak to. Whom could I tell? My friends? They'd desert me in a second. My father held the most liberal views—but on this? Who else? Write to one of my teachers? See a doctor? Tell Oliver. There is no one else to tell" (61). Oliver being Elio's refuge is understandable because Elio claims that their relationship feels like "coming home to a place where everyone is like you, where people know, they just know—coming home as when everything falls into place and you suddenly realize that for seventeen years all you'd been doing was fiddling with the wrong combination" (15). That Elio simply refuses to establish bonds with others due to the impossibility of being understood would apparently allow him not to perform as a heterosexual in front of others so as to hide his homosexuality. However, the knowledge continuum he establishes with Oliver ultimately forces Elio to keep pretending and passing as a heterosexual out of fear and paranoia.

It is pretty clear that the structure of the novel is built around binary oppositions: homosexual/heterosexual, inside/outside, knowledge/lack of knowledge; innocence/experience and so on and so forth. There are also two different levels in the narrative and the reality of the novel depending on Elio's freedom to perform as a homosexual or pass as a heterosexual. On the one hand, Elio has to perform as a heterosexual in his daily public interactions with Oliver, the members of the household and his friends. On the other hand, the fact that the novel is told from Elio's perspective allows him a higher degree of freedom since he does not need to perform during his dialogue with the reader. By having access to Elio's dreams and sexual fantasies, the reader is able to truly identify Elio's desire for Oliver as purely homosexual, but

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fiesta is presented as an embrace and a celebration of different cultures in which American tourists do not feel any different from those who surround them. Connections are made through dancing, drinking, flirting and talking.

it also gives readers insight into the character's paranoia. Therefore, there seem to be two different levels in the structure of the novel, a physical and performative level and a more psychological level that contains Elio's dreams, thoughts and fantasies.

First of all, Elio's psychological world seems to be totally under his control. For instance, Elio's dreams and fantasies turn him into a willful individual without paranoia and fear of being exposed, whereas Oliver is no longer a threat to Elio's open secret. The best example of how the psychological level works in the novel are Elio's sexual fantasies since the text works "as a space where desire might be put instead of speaking it" (Winning 58). Elio does not need to hide and can be as straightforward as he wants, imagining dialogues and situations between him and Oliver: "The afternoon [Oliver] finally walked into my room without knocking as if summoned by my prayers and asked how come I wasn't with the others at the beach, and all I could think of saying ... was, To be with you, Oliver. With or without my bathing suit. To be with you on my bed. Do with me what you want. Take me" (15). The way the active/passive dichotomy is portrayed in the novel is also interesting as it seems that the line that separates both concepts is either blurred or non-existent. As sexual fantasies give or take power away from Elio depending on whether he takes on the passive or the active roles, the novel denies "the Classically based, *pederastic* assumption that male-male bonds ... must be structured around some difference—young/old, for example, active/passive—whose binarizing cultural power would be at least comparable to that of gender" (Sedgwick, *Epistemology* 160). For example, Elio encourages Oliver to do whatever he wants with him, whereas in another moment Elio stares at Oliver and thinks: "Did you know I came in your mouth last night?" (39). His own mind grants Elio a power over Oliver that his body is never able to provide. Everything that will be discussed in the following part of this section is related to the significance of Elio's mind in his relationship with Oliver and how Elio approaches each interaction with him.

Whereas the psychological level offers Elio more safety and freedom to expose himself, he exists in the physical level whenever he has to interact with others. Thus, the physical level is the one in which Elio needs to perform, which triggers his paranoia and isolation. Let us take for instance one of the first examples of physical interaction between Oliver and Elio. After playing a tennis match, Oliver squeezes his thumb and forefingers into Elio's shoulder "in imitation of a friendly hug-massage" (15). Said physical contact makes Elio "go limp and will-less," comparing himself to butter melting (17). Furthermore, Elio compares himself to a virgin being touched for the first time: "What had totally panicked me when he touched me was

exactly what startles virgins on being touched for the first time by the person they desire: he stirs nerves in them they never knew existed and that produce far, far more disturbing pleasures than they are used to on their own” (16). Elio is unable to control the physical level, that is, his bodily reactions to Oliver’s touch. The body is presented as an obstacle that Elio needs to overcome so as to be able to perform his heterosexuality in a proper way because the body reflects desire.

Whereas Elio seems in control of his dreams and sexual fantasies, his body is a threat to his performance, leading to paranoia and highlighting the idea that his relationship with Oliver is indeed a game of masquerading the open secret: “Would [Oliver] *not* have noticed the meaning behind my abrupt shrinking away from his hand? *Not* know that I didn’t want him to let go of me? *Not* sense that when he started massaging me, my inability to relax was my last refuge, my last defense, my last pretense?” (23). Another interaction between both characters that illustrates the idea of the body giving away the truth is when Oliver walks into Elio’s room and finds him wearing only a bathing suit. The first thing that Elio wonders is whether he is wearing his bathing suit “lower than was decent” (24); moreover, once Oliver suggests they go to the beach together, Elio implies that they should stay in his room instead. While he tells that to Oliver, he is at the same time thinking: “Let your hand travel wherever it wishes, take my suit off, take me, I won’t make a noise, won’t tell a soul, I’m hard and you know it, and if you won’t, I’ll take that hand of yours and slip it into my suit now and let you put as many fingers as you want inside me” (24). Once again, Elio is in control of his fantasies and imagination, although his body is the one that opens the doors of the glass closet: “When I looked at my crotch, to my complete dismay I saw it was damp. Had he seen it? Surely he must have” (24). Apparently, the body cannot be controlled by the self, but the idea of the body revealing the truth poses an interesting question: is there any indistinct line between the psychological and the physical levels or is there an unbridgeable gap?

What seems to bring both levels together, at least in Elio’s case, is sex. Even though sex will be discussed in the second part of this section as well, understanding the different functions that it has is a significant aspect in the analysis of the novel. As mentioned earlier, *Call Me by Your Name* is built around dichotomies and duality. The gap between those binary pairs can only be overcome through a mixture of mind and body, imagination and physicality. We already know that the passive/active dichotomy is made pointless by Elio’s performance; likewise, Elio seems to challenge the young/old dichotomy. Sex is in fact what ultimately renders the age

difference between Elio and Oliver meaningless in the eyes of the characters. Hence, sex seems to bridge the gap between the psychological and the physical levels as Elio says:

I had already brought my mouth to his. Something unexpected seemed to clear away between us, and, for a second, it seemed there was absolutely no difference in age between us, just two men kissing, and even this seemed to dissolve, as I began we were not even two men, just two beings. I loved feeling younger and older, human to human, man to man, Jew to Jew. (132)

Same-sex desire does of course not fit into the hegemonic standard of masculine behavior; consequently, Elio has to pass as a heterosexual so as to avoid suspicions. According to Judith Butler, this can be accomplished by producing “discrete and asymmetrical oppositions between the ‘feminine’ and ‘masculine,’ where these are understood as expressive attributes of ‘male’ and ‘female’” (17). Even though Elio challenges the oppositional pairs that have been traditionally attached to male-male bonds, he needs to perpetuate certain hegemonic masculine behaviors so as to remain in the closet. This can be seen when Elio is interacting with others: “Because everyone liked [Oliver], I had to say I liked him too. I was like men who openly declare other men irresistibly handsome the better to conceal that they’re aching to embrace them. To withhold universal approval would simply alert others that I had concealed motives for needing to resist him” (38). Elio has to perform his gender following the hegemonic ideals of masculinity; therefore, he is keeping himself inside the closet, imprisoning or closing his identity by creating a homogeneous gender identity through a compulsory heterosexuality (Butler 31). Moreover, Judith Butler argues that not only are the ambiguities, the indistinct lines of homosexual behavior “suppressed and redescribed within the reified framework of the disjunctive and asymmetrical binary of masculine/feminine” but she also says that “these cultural configurations of gender confusion operate as sites for intervention, exposure, and displacement of these reifications” (31). To remain inside the closet involves perpetuating certain toxic traces of hegemonic masculinity and compulsory heterosexuality that end up being harmful for homosexuals attempting to come out.

However, male-male bonds—involving homosexual desire or not—are also harmful for women, who are constructed as the Other and defined in relation to male behavior and not because of their own identity. *Call Me by Your Name* is also an analysis of the role women play in male-male dynamics. A housemaid called Mafalda, Elio’s mother, a child called Viminì, and two girls called Chiara and Marzia are the main female characters in the novel. Saying that

women play secondary roles in the novel does not reflect their lack of importance or presence as much as it shows how some of the women—Chiara and Marzia in the novel—are used by Elio and Oliver so as to cover up their homoerotic relationship. However, Elio and Oliver’s use of Chiara and Marzia as covers belongs to an earlier stage in their relationship. It is important to note how rather than defining their relationship as homosexual, we can say that Elio and Oliver have a homosocial desire, which, historically, “describes social bonds between persons of the same sex” and “is meant to be distinguished from ‘homosexual’” (Sedgwick, *Between Men* 1). Sedgwick deconstructs the traditional meaning of homosociality by drawing the concept back into “the orbit of ‘desire,’ of the potentially erotic” (*Between Men* 1) and breaking the continuum between homosexual and homosocial. If the continuum is indeed broken, then homosexuality and homosociality are no longer polar opposites but rather part of the same experience. Therefore, a male homosocial bond can lead to homosexual desire.

But this evolution is curbed by the closet itself since homosexuals have to choose between remaining inside the closet or coming out and experiencing a mixture of freedom and homophobia. Hence, in spite of Sedgwick placing homosociality within homosexuality and vice versa, homosexual men are still trapped inside the closet. Yet, as we shall see next, women are also victims of the homosocial desire. Sedgwick quotes Heidi Hartmann’s definition of patriarchy to point out that the domination of women is still attached to the homosocial bond. Hartmann defines the patriarchal order as: “Relations between men, which have a material base, and which, though hierarchical, establish or create interdependence and solidarity among men that enable them to dominate women” (qtd. in Sedgwick, *Between Men* 2). It is not only that women are dominated but they are also regarded as obstacles in the homosocial/homosexual fulfillment of men. Even though this issue will be addressed in depth later on, it is appropriate to give an introductory example of how women curb male homosociality at times. For example, Elio’s father seemingly portrays his own wife as an obstacle he could not overcome when discussing Elio’s relationship with Oliver once the latter has already returned to the United States near the end of the book: “You had a beautiful friendship. Maybe more than a friendship. And I envy you. I may have come close, but I never had what you had. Something always held me back or stood in the way” (224). Instead of reinforcing and perpetuating compulsory heterosexuality through homophobia as Sedgwick argued earlier, Elio’s father—the patriarchal figure—seems to regret his own lack of opportunities to have had a same-sex relationship in his youth.



The idea of women as obstacles follows the argument presented by French feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray, who argues that “both the subject and the Other are masculine mainstays of a closed phallogocentric<sup>3</sup> signifying economy that achieves its totalizing goal through the exclusion of the feminine altogether” (qtd. in Butler 9). *Call Me by Your Name* does not always present women as the Other (if we understand the concept of the Other as women being defined according to the binary pair male/female) but as entirely outside any kind of opposition. As Irigaray says, women do no longer exist in relation to men but have been turned into invisible beings and removed altogether: “Women constitute a paradox, if not a contradiction, within the discourse of identity itself. Women are the ‘sex’ which is not ‘one.’ Within a language pervasively masculinist, phallogocentric language, women constitute the *unrepresentable*” (qtd. in Butler 9). On the whole, *Call Me by Your Name* depicts its female characters as either obstacles in men’s sexual and romantic fulfilment or as tools that can be used and enjoyed by men.

Let us begin a more specific analysis of the female characters by addressing how Marzia and Chiara are tools in Elio and Oliver’s closeting of the truth. This idea follows Lévi-Strauss in defining the homosocial relation between men as a “total relationship of exchange ... not established between a man and a woman, but between two groups of men, [in which] the woman figures only as one of the objects in the exchange, not as one of the partners” (qtd. in Sedgwick, *Epistemology* 184). Elio’s hope to one day be able to have a romantic relationship with Oliver is curbed when he starts suspecting that Oliver and Chiara could be having a sexual relationship: “With Chiara [Oliver] loved heading out into the deep on our twin-hulled rowboat for a *gita*, with him rowing while she lounged in the sun on one of the hulls, eventually removing her bra once they had stopped and were far from shore” (43). Interestingly enough, witnessing this scene does not simply make Elio jealous, but it also arouses him not only because of Oliver, but because of Chiara as well: “I was watching. I dreaded losing him to her. Dreaded losing her to him too. Yet thinking of them together did not dismay me. It made me hard, even though I didn’t know if what aroused me was her naked body lying in the sun, his next to hers, or both of theirs together” (43). Defining Elio’s sexual orientation may seem quite complex as a result of his apparent bisexuality—even more so when he has several sexual encounters with Marzia

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<sup>3</sup> Phallogocentrism is a deconstructionist term used to describe the ways in which logocentrism (the superiority of speech over written language) and phallocentrism (the phallus at the center of speech) intertwine in order to create a signifying economy based on the control of speech by the phallus, which reinforces patriarchal privileges.

later in the novel—although his handling of the situation actually reflects that his only sexual desire is in fact homoerotic whereas Chiara is a pawn in Elio and Oliver’s game.

Elio decides to turn Oliver and Chiara’s relationship into a triangle he takes part in: “I would have done anything to ruin every opportunity they had to be alone. But I also wanted to see them do it, I wanted to be in on it, have them owe me and make me their necessary accomplice, their go-between” (44). Elio’s desire to be constantly present shows a voyeuristic, obsessive side of his personality<sup>4</sup>. He does not need to be the lover of either of them, yet he wants to be in control of the situation by pretending he is helping the couple. By behaving like that, Elio is able to hide his desire towards Oliver and take control over the knowledge/lack of knowledge dichotomy and his own secret. Furthermore, he claims he wants to look at Oliver and Chiara; the meaningfulness of Elio’s voyeuristic tendency is explained by French philosopher Jacques Lacan’s notion of the gaze: “The gaze must function as an object around which the exhibitionistic and voyeuristic impulses that constitute the scopic drive turn—in short, the gaze must be an object of the scopic drive, producing not merely anxiety but also pleasure” (qtd. in Krips 93). Chiara is defined as the object of arousal not simply because of her body but also for the reaction she generates. She unconsciously participates of Elio and Oliver’s relationship by being commodified as a sexual object to be contemplated by the male gaze. Elio then claims that he does not wish to turn the relationship into a triangle “just to get [Oliver] aroused in my presence, or to make him need me, but in urging him to speak about her behind her back, I’d turn Chiara into the object of man-to-man gossip. It would allow us to warm up to one another through her, to bridge the gap between us by admitting we were drawn to the same woman” (45). Chiara’s dialectical closure and commodification as a body that can be stared at, consumed, and enjoyed by men cancels her identity as a woman since she is only regarded from a sexual point of view as Judith Butler explains:

The identification of women with “sex” ... is a conflation of the category of women with the ostensibly sexualized features of their bodies and, hence, a refusal to grant freedom and autonomy to women as it is purportedly enjoyed by men. Thus, the destruction of the category of sex would be the destruction of an attribute, sex, that [sic]

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<sup>4</sup> It should be noted that Elio’s obsession with Oliver is not limited to his voyeurism as it also spreads to more controlling thoughts. This excerpt summarizes this idea: “I wanted [Oliver] dead too, so that if I couldn’t stop thinking about him, at least his death would put an end to it. If I didn’t kill him, then I’d cripple him for life, so that he’d be with us in a wheelchair and never go back to the States” (42).

has, through a misogynist gesture of synecdoche, come to take the place of the person, the self-determining *cogito*. (19)

Although Chiara is alienated from her body and her identity by means of Elio's masculine gaze, the same could be applied to other characters in the novel. This paper will discuss later on how Elio's gaze constructs Oliver's body through an aesthetic, Wildean approach towards beauty and sexuality; however, let us now discuss how Elio does in fact dominate his and other characters' bodies through his own gaze.

As mentioned earlier, Lacan states that the individual's voyeuristic instincts arise through the gaze, but he also mentions the individual's exhibitionistic nature. As a matter of fact, Elio himself creates a direct relation between his body and sexual desire whenever he exposes his body. For instance, there is a moment when Elio is lying naked in his bed in which he says: "All I wanted was for [Oliver] or Marzia to pass by my balcony door and, through the half-drawn shutters, make out my naked body sprawled on the bed. Him or Marzia—but I wanted someone to pass by and notice me, and up to them to decide what to do" (146). Chiara's body comprises her entire identity according to the male gaze, and her body is limited, closed, by Elio's desire; however, Elio describes his own body as infinite, using the word "sprawl" so as to make more emphatic how the male body is freer than the female. The idea that the body is a prison of sorts for the female identity is also discussed by Judith Butler: "This association of the body with the female works along magical relations of reciprocity whereby the female sex becomes restricted to its body, and the male body, fully disavowed, becomes paradoxically, the incorporeal instrument of an ostensibly radical freedom" (Butler 11-12). Hence, the masculine body seems closer to the concept of the body electric that Walt Whitman proposes in his poem "Song of Myself" (1855); Elio's body is a source of energy and heat, something to be desired and sexually charged, as evidenced by the sexual fantasies in which Oliver walks into Elio's room: "I'd lie on my bed wearing only my bathing suit, my entire body on fire" (14). By celebrating his and Oliver's bodies, Elio creates a clear distinction between the politics of the female and male bodies, creating a new "dialectic of master-slave, here fully reformulated within the nonreciprocal terms of gender asymmetry" (Butler 11-12). The female body is corporeal, physical and easily dominated by men but the male body is a disembodied universality.

Let us move on to the discussion of Marzia's importance within the power dynamics between Elio and Oliver, it is worth mentioning that while Chiara's role is reduced to the

triangle created by Elio, Marzia's is slightly more complex. Marzia and Elio's sexual encounters take place once he and Oliver have already revealed their sexual desire to each other. Even though their relationship will be discussed at length in the second part of this section, Oliver's ultimate rejection of Elio's sexual advances is important when analyzing the role of Marzia in said relationship. Unlike Chiara, Marzia does not take part in a triangle with Oliver and Elio but rather enters a sexual relationship with Elio in which feelings may or may not be involved. It is quite hard to figure whether Elio does in fact feel anything for Marzia apart from sexual desire, not because of any particular ambiguity in the couple but due to the fact that Oliver is constantly present in Elio's mind: "While kissing [Marzia] more passionately now, and with our hands straying all over each other's bodies, I found myself composing the note I resolved to slip under [Oliver's] door that night: *Can't stand the silence. I need to speak to you*" (117). Marzia is reduced to a complement, a mere pastime that Elio uses to entertain himself until he can finally be with Oliver. Besides, she is not a sexual object as Chiara was either because Marzia is not really the cause for Elio's arousal but rather an empty body that Elio uses to try and get to Oliver. For instance, Elio's narration of one of the times he has sex with Marzia shows how the couple lacks passion and interest, since all Elio can think of is Oliver:

I took [Marzia] upstairs by way of the balcony into my bedroom. We made love in utter silence, neither of us closing our eyes. Part of me hoped we'd bang against the wall, or that she'd be unable to smother a cry, and that all this might alert Oliver to what was happening on the other side of his wall. I imagined him napping and hearing my bedsprings and being upset (123).

Since Elio is the novel's narrator, Marzia's feelings are seldom addressed and readers get more insight into the sexual intercourse itself rather than into the significance that Marzia may have in Elio's life. As a matter of fact, Elio's thoughts reinforce his aforementioned lack of interest in Marzia and the girl's status as nothing but a pawn. Elio shows how everything he does with Marzia seems to be rehearsed, scripted and artificial, which truly shows how he is indeed performing his heterosexuality. When Elio and Marzia are together, Marzia acts cautiously and tries to protect herself, saying to Elio: "I think you can hurt me and I don't want to be hurt. *Ma tu mi vuoi veramente bene*, do you really care for me?" (116-117). Elio's reply confirms the scripted nature of his heterosexual performance: "I wanted to look at her, stare in her eyes as she held me in her hand, tell her how long I'd wanted to kiss her, say something to show that the person who'd called her tonight and picked her up at her house was no longer the same cold, lifeless boy" (116). Although we may say that Elio truly cares about Marzia and

their relationship, his performance is cancelled by the presence of Oliver in everything he does or says. It can also be argued that Marzia behaves according to certain standards of toxic femininity that establish the subjugation of women to the male individual's sexual desires. By asking Elio not to hurt her, Marzia is not empowering herself in any way, especially when it is quite obvious that she is fully aware of Elio's lack of feelings for her and his latent homosexuality. It seems that feeling desired by the male gaze is more important in this case than the possibility of getting hurt, which follows the ideas outlined by African American writer Morgan Jerkins in her 2018 collection of essays *This Will Be My Undoing*:

I imagined the male gaze to be like Doctor T. J. Eckleburg's eyes, which watch over all of Long Island in *The Great Gatsby*. You can never be out of the line of sight. I perused tweets and essays by women whom I admired, in which they proclaimed that they didn't need men to feel beautiful, let alone desired. I envied their confidence. Most of these women were in long-term relationships, whereas I had never been in one of any length and I wasn't quite sure what men wanted. I viewed men as potentially scary, but I still wanted to be desired by them. (70)

When being desired by a male replaces any other identity trace of the female individual, then it is easier for men to use women and create a cultural narrative built around the idea that women should be physically attractive and sexually available to men no matter the consequences. Morgan Jerkins follows her thoughts on the obligation of women to be desirable by claiming that said sexual attractiveness leads to both the invisibility and the hypervisibility of the female body:

If, just for a moment, I could matter to the gender that I was trying to attract, that momentarily erased my invisibility. But when the moment ended, I'd search for my next fix. It is the conundrum of being doubly subjugated: You are both invisible and hypervisible, stripped of humanity. And if you are not acknowledged at all, even in the most vulgar of ways, then do you still have a body? Are you still a woman without men watching you? (71)

Hence, while Elio understands his sexual intercourses with Marzia as liberating and beneficial acts that allow him to perform his compulsory heterosexuality without raising suspicion amongst the rest of the characters, Marzia's desired to be sexually wanted by Elio accomplishes quite the opposite as not only is she hurt by Elio, but she is also repeatedly ignored and rejected before Elio and Oliver are finally able to stop pretending.

Once it is clear that Marzia plays an important role in Elio's performance of his heterosexuality, we must dwell on the idea that gender and sexual orientation are performed and the ways in which women may be used to hide the truth. This paper argues that Elio performs his compulsory heterosexuality and masculinity as a consequence of the knowledge/lack of knowledge continuum that dominates his and Oliver's lives, thus looking for ways to revert that situation in order to be the one who actually dominates the space of the closet and his own life. Women are often a means for men to remain inside the closet insofar as they are dominated and used as tools or covers by homosexual men. The commodification of the female body as a sexual object allows men to live within the homosocial/homosexual continuum as the role that Chiara and Marzia play in *Call Me by Your Name* attests. However, women are also seen as obstacles to male homosociality as illustrated earlier by Elio's father's regrets at not having had a homosocial/homosexual relationship himself. But women are not only an obstacle to male-male desire, they are also presented as threats depending on whether they know about Elio and Oliver's homosexuality or not. In this case, the female gaze is what forces Elio and Oliver back into the closet.

The best example of the female gaze as threat is the family's handmaid, Mafalda. Though caring and friendly, Mafalda is often portrayed as an authority figure that watches over everything that takes place inside the house. She could even be described as the real mother figure in Elio's life in contrast with his actual mother who, as we will see next, is conspicuous by her absence throughout most of the novel. By being the housemaid, Mafalda has access to most of Elio's secrets, so she really is a constant threat for Elio and Oliver. The most illustrative moment of Mafalda's threatening status in relation to Elio and Oliver comes after a physical interaction between them during dinner. Thinking that nobody is watching, Oliver decides to place one of his feet on Elio's while "caressing it, rubbing it, never holding still ... indicating, all the while, that this was being done in the spirit of fun and games ... telling [Elio] that this had nothing to do with others and would remain strictly between [them]" (84). This physical interaction triggers a new bodily reaction in Elio, whose nose starts bleeding. Perhaps as a result of a new example of the body giving away the closeted truth, Elio suspects that Mafalda saw Oliver's foot touching his after he believes that Mafalda is looking at him "as if humoring someone who'd been hurt enough already. The bitch knew. She must have seen the foot. Her eyes followed me every step of the way as if ready to pounce on my knife before I slit my veins with it" (89). Elio reacts angrily to the possibility of Mafalda knowing about his homosexuality

precisely because the idea of the mother figure knowing seems to be worse than the knowledge of the father.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick wonders whether both the coming-out testament and its continued refusal to come out are actually addressed to the mother, arguing that the mother not being allowed to know is “both an analytic inference (she never acts as if she knows, and anyway how could she know?) and a blank imperative: she *mustn't* know” (*Epistemology* 248). Even so, when Elio’s father tells him that he had indeed known about his relationship with Oliver all along, he also hints at the possibility of Elio’s mother knowing: “I wanted to ask him how he knew. But then, how could he not have known? ‘Does Mother know?’ I asked. I was going to say *suspect* but corrected myself. ‘I don’t think she does.’ His voice meant, *But even if she did, I am sure her attitude would be no different than mine*” (225). It is worth remembering that in the early stages of the novel Elio refuses to tell anybody, neither family nor friends, of his homosexuality because of the reaction it may cause. Anxiety and fear of coming out of the closet come as a consequence of the systemic alienation and demonization of homosexuals throughout history; hence, Elio’s fears are clearly justified. Nonetheless, *Call Me by Your Name* seems to offer an alternative reality in the sense that Elio’s homosexuality does not cause a bad reaction in those who know about it. In the case that the novel may be criticized as a result of its romanticized, idealistic vision of a society that rejects the almost compulsory homophobia of Western society, said criticism would be ignoring that Aciman’s novel does indeed offer the more realistic side of the coming out process.

Leaving the United States and moving to Europe has been presented as a solution to the old social stigmas against homosexuals; Oliver is able to have a short but eventful relationship with Elio based not only on sexual desire but on romantic feelings as well. The second part of this section will discuss how Italy is presented as an alternative reality, a bubble that isolates Elio and Oliver from what is considered a homophobic society. Nevertheless, Oliver remains in the closet as much as Elio does despite his no longer being in America. As much as Elio’s parents, Mafalda, and the rest of the characters may sympathize and accept their relationship, Elio and Oliver are never truly free to expose their secret simply because they have no way of knowing what others may think of them. Coming out is indeed a personal decision, although the social component must never be ignored as it is perhaps the most influential factor in that decision. As Sedgwick says: “There can be few gay people, however courageous and forthright by habit, however fortunate in the support of their immediate communities, in whose lives the closet is not still a shaping presence” (68). There are many examples in literary history of

homosexual characters being presented as either outcasts or mad simply because they go against society's principles; homosexual characters are transgressive, which is why more often than not, they are portrayed as evil tricksters or criminals<sup>5</sup>. Homosexuality is indeed a disruptive force that challenges the principles of a society that attempts to homogenize and control every single aspect of everyday life. If we understand that homosexuality is in fact a deviation from the principles that rule patriarchal society<sup>6</sup>, then the solution to the "homosexual problem" is the compulsory heterosexuality or the isolation and marginalization of the homosexual individual who has either decided to come out of the closet or has been consumed by the paranoia and isolation of life inside the closet.

But let us see how *Call Me by Your Name* actually portrays the struggle of the homosexual individual who decides (or is forced) to remain inside the closet. Remaining inside the closet involves performance as well, since one cannot choose to stop being a homosexual just because he or she is afraid of coming out. As part of a society that promotes and perpetuates compulsory heterosexuality, the ultimate form of hegemonic male-female relationship is marriage. Marriage as theatre "exists in and for the eyes of others" and it is "constituted as a spectacle that denies its audience the ability either to look away from it or equally to intervene in it" (Parker and Sedgwick 2). When Oliver tells Elio he is getting married, he is putting on the ultimate performance, especially because immediately after announcing his marriage, Oliver tells Elio: "I'd love nothing better than to take your clothes off and at the very least hold you. But I can't" (227). In this case, getting married equals surrendering to society's principles, and marriage is portrayed as an obstacle in the individual's self-fulfillment and pursuit of happiness.

If the future of Elio and Oliver inside the closet is bleak and marked by staged heterosexuality, the option of coming out does not seem like a real possibility either. The novel uses Anchise, the family's gardener, as the embodiment of how social prejudices may affect the lives of homosexuals. Anchise is not one of the main characters; as a matter of fact, he is

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<sup>5</sup> See Herman Melville's *Billy Budd, Sailor* (1924) or *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade* (1857) for a portrayal of homosexuality as related to either deviousness or trickery. Melville's approach towards homosexuality is important because of the historical backdrop against which his works take place, as well as the fact that most of them deal with male-male bonds based on masculinity and camaraderie established during life at sea.

<sup>6</sup> In terms of modern approaches towards the relation between madness, social stigma and homosexuality, we could name Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood* (1936), Allen Ginsberg's *Howl and Other Poems* (1956), John Rechy's *The Sexual Outlaw* (1963) or Samuel R. Delaney's *Hogg* (1995) as good examples.



actually described as a marginal character that, though present at most times, is usually lurking in the background. And the truth is that Anchise is far from a man who may be spying on others, mainly because there is nothing in his behavior that may lead readers to believe Anchise is a dangerous character that deserves suspicion; however, most of the characters that interact with him on a daily basis seem to hold the opinion that Anchise is indeed “a creep” (58). We know that Anchise is an outcast through certain aspects of his life and personality. Although we do not know the reason behind the decision, Anchise was expelled from the military, an institution that has always been related to hegemonic masculinity and heterosexuality. Besides, his job as a gardener seems to be related to a certain kind of solitude and idleness that isolates him from the rest of the characters. For instance, Elio’s family decides to stay at home on a stormy evening when they “sat in the living room, listening to the music and to the hail pelting every window in the house. The lights would go out, the music would die, and all we had was each other’s faces” (58). In spite of everybody gathering together in the living room, Elio sees “in the rain, the lean, cloaked, hooded figure of the gardener doing battle with the elements, always pulling up weeds” (58), which Elio’s aunt claims “gives [her] the creeps” (58). The attitude of Elio’s aunt goes to show the extent to which the supposed closeted homosexual is turned into an outcast by societal prejudices.

Elio himself reinforces the relation between homosexuality and madness through his descriptions of Anchise: “I should ... try not to disturb Anchise. Sinister Anchise—everyone said he was sinister. Had I suspected it all along? I must have” (153). What Elio seems to have suspected all along is Anchise’s homosexuality, which Elio is unconsciously relating to Anchise being sinister and a creep in the eye of his relatives. Elio’s suspicions are emphasized by the contrast between traditional and non-traditional masculine behavior in Anchise. Elio links Anchise’s sinister attitude to his tenderness when taking care of Oliver. When Oliver scrapes his thigh after falling from his bike, Anchise applies “some sort of witch’s brew” and fixes the bike for him, which immediately turns Anchise into a homosexual according to Elio. This is what Elio uses to support his suspicions about Anchise’s homosexuality: “The fall from the bike, Anchise’s peasant ointment, the kindness with which he took care of him and cleaned up the scrape” (153). This poses an interesting question: is not Elio’s assumption that Anchise is homosexual just because he took care of Oliver homophobic? Elio is definitely breaking the homosocial/homosexual continuum outlined by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick by his perception of Anchise as sinister. Elio projects his fears and anxieties onto Anchise, who acts as a sort of double for Elio insofar as he is showing the possibility of evil or goodness of the homosexual

self. In other words, Anchise works as Elio's doppelgänger or a haunting presence that threatens Elio's homosexuality by confronting Elio with a possible future inside the closet.

Accepting that Anchise works as a reflection of Elio's anxieties would then lead to a Lacanian explanation of why Elio sees Anchise like that. As part of his notion of the gaze, Lacan argues that there is "a disruption, a point of indeterminacy in the visual field, where the subject fails to see" (qtd. in Krips 94). Failing to see means there is something that makes it difficult for the individual to actually see what is in front of him/her, which, if explained from a social point of view, would be the homophobia that breaks the homosexual/homosocial continuum. Hence, the concept of the gaze in *Call Me by Your Name* seems to be contradictory in the sense that, on the one hand, it is able to bring both pleasure and anxiety to the individual while, on the other hand, the act of seeing and being seen involves the idea of knowing (both the other person's secrets and real identity). Gloria Anzaldúa analyzes these "seemingly contradictory aspects—the act of being seen, held immobilized by a glance, and 'seeing through' an experience" (64) in her own discussion of the gaze in relation to knowledge: "The eye pins down the object of its gaze, scrutinizes it, judges it. A glance can freeze us in place; it can 'possess' us. It can erect a barrier against the world. But in a glance also lies awareness, knowledge" (64). Whereas Elio "freezes" Oliver's body in the Wildean sense of the body as beauty and something artistic, the way Elio stares at Anchise definitely produces a homophobic behavior in him, which also signals Elio's obsession with the male body. Why would Elio be bothered by Anchise's attempts at healing Oliver's injuries? There is an argument to be made that Elio is not actually bothered insofar as this could be another example of Elio's voyeuristic gaze, which fits with the Lacanian explanation of the stain:

A stain is associated with a gaze only in so far as it precipitates ... anxiety but also precipitates the double transformation in the voyeuristic act of looking ... through which the stain becomes an object of the scopic drive: first, a transformation into the reflexive middle voice—"I look at myself"—followed by a second transformation into the passive "I am looked at." (qtd. in Krips 94)

But Elio's emphasis on Anchise's body can also be explained as part of the novel's presentation of homosexuality as belonging to the middle or upper class. Elio turns his attention to Anchise's social class not simply by adding the pre-modifier "peasant" to the word "ointment", but also through his description of Anchise's hands, which have "gnarled, calloused fingers that were always ripping out weeds from the parched earth" (146). The emphasis on

Anchise's working class condition offers a contrast to Elio's own privileged, upper class background and the context to which his and Oliver's homosexuality belongs. Even Anchise's and Elio's hands are used for completely opposite purposes; while Anchise uses his rough hands to rip weeds and raise crops, Elio uses his to play the piano. In other words, Elio is able to create art and beauty through his hands while it seems that Anchise's hands are used for less delicate purposes.

Artistic production and the power that art and aesthetics have in the construction of identity are what the second part of this section aims to discuss. This first part has already established that the relationship between Elio and Oliver is based on desire and the knowledge/lack of knowledge dichotomy, but their relationship is ultimately turned into a power dynamic in which one individual attempts to dominate the other. Sex, the importance of the male body, the gaze, and Italy all play significant roles in the construction of said power dynamics, which we will address in the following part.

## **2.2. The aesthetics of power**

The previous part of this section mentioned how Oliver gets married by the end of the novel. He also ends up having children, surrendering to the ideal of the suburban American family so as to be able to remain inside the closet and avoid social prejudices. When learning about Oliver's marriage, Elio considers it to be wonderful news although he later realizes that Oliver's wife is an obstacle for their relationship that can hardly be overcome (226). The truth is that even if Oliver had never gotten married in the first place, Elio and Oliver's relationship was on borrowed time since the beginning of the novel. Oliver spends six weeks in Elio's house and, apart from meeting two more times ten years after the events narrated in the book, they never see each other again.

The knowledge that their love is impossible due to society's values making it quite difficult for a homosexual couple to live without the presence of society's prejudices, as well as their limited time to be together, provides the novel with an atmosphere based on the classical idea of *tempus fugit*—which is even more significant given the setting of the novel—in which Oliver and Elio have to fight against the passing of time. Since Elio is the narrator of the novel and tells it as if he were writing his personal diary, he has control over the text and supplies it with a certain lack of temporality in which he places reality inside a bubble. Elio isolates the places where the action takes place from the real world, not allowing anybody nor anything

from the outside to come and disturb his vision of reality. Throughout this second part, we will see how Elio attaches meanings, memories, and feelings to places, objects, or actions so as to be able to challenge the passing of time and the end of his romance with Oliver. Hence, all the emotions and memories Elio experiences during his time with Oliver are:

Embossed on every song that was a hit that summer, in every novel I read during and after [Oliver's] stay, on anything from the smell of rosemary on hot days to the frantic rattle of the cicadas in the afternoon—smells and sounds I'd grown up with and known every year of my life until then but that had suddenly turned on me and acquired an inflection forever colored by the events of that summer. (10)

Elio starts reminiscing about the time in which his love for Oliver may have started, saying that it could have happened “during those endless hours after lunch when everybody lounged about in bathing suits inside and outside the house, bodies sprawled everywhere, killing time before someone finally suggested we head down to the rocks for a swim” (5). The idleness of these summer afternoons provides the aforementioned timelessness to the story. It is also interesting to note that the name of the town where Elio's family lives is never specified, being simply called “B.”, which creates a dream-like feeling, almost as if the story had never taken place and everything had been one of Elio's dreams or sexual fantasies.

The idleness attached to these memories is reminiscent to the whole atmosphere that surrounds Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), an author and a book whose influence on *Call Me by Your Name* should not be overlooked. Wilde, just like Aciman, uses long summer afternoons as the backdrop against which his novel takes place. The opening lines of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* illustrate the idea of summer as an isolated season in which time goes by more slowly and reality seems to work in a different, dream-like way. The book begins amidst the rich odor of roses, the light summer wind and “the heavy scent of the lilac, or the more delicate perfume of the pink-flowering thorn” (1). Lord Henry Wotton, one of the three main characters in Wilde's novel, is lying on a divan of Persian saddle-bags from which he can “catch the gleam of the honey-sweet and honey-coloured blossoms of a laburnum, whose tremulous branches seemed hardly able to bear the burden of a beauty so flamelike as theirs” (1). Wilde highlights the drowsiness and pastoral beauty of the scene by describing the “sullen murmur of the bees shouldering their way through the long unmown grass, or circling with monotonous insistence round the dusty gilt horns of the straggling woodbine” that “make the stillness more oppressive” (1). Finally, the narrator says that “the dim roar of London was like

the bourdon note of a distant organ” (1). Just like *Call Me by Your Name* surrounds itself with pastoral beauty, Wilde seems to challenge the passing of time and the *tempus fugit* by using a different classical convention such as the *locus amoenus*. The focus is on nature and the pleasure and beauty that it helps convey, with the only reference to human creation being the Persian divan in which Lord Henry is resting. Of course, elements that come from the East, mainly regions such as Persia or countries like India, Thailand or Japan are all regarded as exotic, and are usually related to homosexuality in the novel. Furthermore, the narrator says that the sound of London is distant and dim, highlighting how isolated the world of the novel is from the rest of civilization.

Everything that takes place in both books exists within its own artificial, artistic reality. That Oliver calls Elio’s house “heaven” multiple times throughout the novel does nothing but highlight how Elio’s narration, just like the narrator in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, creates a sublime, idyllic world that remains between fiction and reality. Elio’s need to cocoon his love story with Oliver in said atmosphere of idleness comes as a reaction towards the fear, anxiety and paranoia that he feels due to the shaping presence of the closet in his life. This has been analyzed in depth in the first point of this section, but Elio’s fear has to be taken into account as it explains how he divides his romance with Oliver into small simulations that will keep their love protected and safe: “In thirty, forty years ... I’d come [to B.] with my wife, my children, show them the sights, point to the bay, the local caffès ... . Then I’d stand here and ask the statue and the straw-backed chairs and shaky wooden tables to remind me of someone called Oliver” (74). By creating those simulations that act as tokens or reminders of Oliver, Elio is actually detaching himself from reality and living in an endless loop of nostalgia, grief and anxiety: “Let summer never end, let [Oliver] never go away, let the music on perpetual replay play forever, I’m asking for very little, and I swear I’ll ask for nothing more” (30).

Nevertheless, the creation of those simulations, as well as the overall atmosphere of the novel, allow Elio to live in a permanent state of bliss: “I was experiencing the mitigated bliss of those who are too superstitious to claim they may get all they’ve ever dreamed of but are far too grateful not to know it could easily be taken away” (123). Though conscious of his fears and the limitations of his relationship with Oliver, Elio cannot help but experience bliss. If we were to read into the several times that Elio mentions the word, we could relate Elio to New Zealander writer Katherine Mansfield, who is actually mentioned by Elio: “I wanted [Oliver] to read me a story. Something by Chekhov or Gogol or Katherine Mansfield” (95). Mansfield wrote a short story titled “Bliss” (1918) in which the protagonist, Bertha, repeatedly claims she

is experiencing a blissful moment when she has dinner with her husband Harry and some friends. However, every aspect of her life and identity that Bertha highlights seems to be fragile, a reality ready to come crumbling down as soon as something unexpected happens:

Really—really—she had everything. She was young. Harry and she were as much in love as ever. She had an adorable baby. They had this absolutely satisfactory house and garden. And friends—modern, thrilling friends, writers and painters and poets. And then there were books, and there was music, and she had found a wonderful little dressmaker, and they were going abroad in the summer, and their new cook made the most superb omelettes. (6)

It is at the end of the story when we discover that Bertha's husband is having an affair with Pearl, one of Bertha's friends, towards whom Bertha herself feels sexually attracted. When trying to come to terms with her sexual desire towards Pearl, Bertha argues that "this does happen very, very rarely between women. Never between men" (8). Bertha, unable to understand her latent homosexuality, tries to turn her sexual impulses into friendly gestures and a female-female bond based on friendship and not on sex. Nevertheless, Bertha's reality loses all its bliss due to her husband's affair and also because she begins to come to terms with her homosexual desire arising in every interaction she has with Pearl: "Both, as it were, caught in that circle of unearthly light, understanding each other perfectly, creatures of another world, and wondering what they were to do in this one with all this blissful treasure that burned in their bosoms and dropped, in silver flowers, from their hair and hands?" (9). As a consequence, Bertha's obsession with how much bliss she feels and how happy she is with every aspect of her life comes across as her way of creating an alternative reality in which her heterosexuality and marriage are never threatened.

The similarities between Elio and Oliver's romance and other stories about latent homosexuality, secrecy, and coming out such as "Bliss" or *The Picture of Dorian Gray* show that, on the one hand, the homosexual experience contains many common features that can be experienced similarly by a homosexual individual in the United States, New Zealand or Italy. Secrecy, anxiety, paranoia and social stigmas are experiences "equally universal, transcending cultures and countries" (Signorile, qtd. in Winning 53). On the other hand, a universalizing view of homosexuality would deny the experiences and privileges that the white homosexuals that appear in these texts enjoy. Certain elements such as race, social class, education or religion should also be taken into account when discussing the different approaches that societies may

have towards homosexuality. It is easier then for Elio's and Oliver's experiences to be much closer to those of the characters in Wilde's novel.

It is these differences in class, privilege or access to high-culture which seem to make it easier for Elio and Oliver to isolate themselves from the rest of the world and live in their pastoral world. Let us analyze the first time Elio and Oliver come out of the closet in front of each other and kiss for the first time to further support the arguments being presented. While taking a walk through town together, Elio and Oliver talk about the possibility that English poet Percy B. Shelley had drowned near there. Then, Elio tells Oliver that one of Shelley's friends had "seized Shelley's heart before the flames had totally engulfed his swollen body" (71). Oliver asks Elio if there is anything he does not know, to which Elio replies: "If only you knew how little I know about the things that really matter" (72). Elio's answer triggers a power game between the two characters in which the knowledge/lack of knowledge continuum is threatened after Elio finally dares to step out of the closet. That words such as "homosexual" or "gay" are never used in the novel is important insofar as Elio and Oliver are going to say much more with their silences and ellipsis than with their words: "Even if I couldn't speak the truth, or even hint at it ... I could swear it lay around us, the way we say of a necklace we've just lost while swimming: I know it's down there somewhere" (72). Both characters are in their way out of the closet, in a state of in-betweenness that will not disappear for the remainder of the novel. This is when Elio decides to take Oliver to a place "most tourists and strangers had never seen" (75), which is Monet's berm, "the spot where Monet came to paint" (76) and that Elio describes as "a soundless, quiet cove. Not a sign of civilization anywhere, no home, no jetty, no fishing boats" (76). Elio and Oliver could not talk about their homosexuality while in town as they were surrendered by other people; however, looking for an isolated spot allows them to freely talk about their feelings. Moreover, the fact that the place they choose to talk is the same spot where Monet used to paint already frames the situation as one of Elio's simulations of reality. Reality is turned into a work of art, something that exists in isolation, independent from the rest of the world.

By taking Oliver to his secret spot, Elio is seemingly introducing Oliver into said work of art: "It had never occurred to me that I had brought him here not just to show him my little world, but to ask my little world to let him in ... so that I might come back here and remember. Here I would come to escape the known world and seek another of my own invention" (77). Since Elio is in control of the physical space, he is now able to be in full control of the space of the closet and his secrets as he manages to escape the gaze of those who surround him and may

give his secret away. As a result, it is Elio's gaze and not the Other's gaze, which comes into play, giving Elio power over the entire situation:

This, I think, is the first time I dared myself to stare back at him. Usually, I'd cast a glance and then look away. Look away because that steely gaze of his always reminded me of how tall he stood and how far below him I ranked. Now, in the silence of the moment, I stare back, not to defy him ... but to surrender, to tell him this is who I am, this is who you are ... there is nothing but truth between us now, and where there's truth there are no barriers. (78)

By claiming that he is surrendering to Oliver, Elio confirms that sexuality is indeed a power dynamic and, more importantly, a means for both of them to get to know themselves as well as to understand each other at the same time. When they finally kiss, Elio says he does not expect to get neither passion nor pleasure but "just the sun, the grass, the occasional sea breeze, and the smell of his body fresh from his chest. Just take me and molt me and turn me inside out, till, like a character in Ovid, I become one with your lust" (81). Lust, flesh and sexuality are all that matters in this context. Love is obviously involved, but perhaps Elio and Oliver are fully aware that any kind of romantic love is impossible; that is why the real rebellion does not simply seem to be homosexual love but homosexual sex. For a sexual orientation that has always been regarded as a mental disease, a crime and a sin, it seems that same-sex desire and lust are what ultimately represent Elio and Oliver's liberation from social constraints.

Their encounter at Monet's berm marks the Wildean descent of Elio and Oliver into decadence, lust and vice. It is here where *The Picture of Dorian Gray* should be mentioned once again. Interesting conclusions can be drawn from the way Oscar Wilde portrays Dorian Gray's descent into madness and vice and how André Aciman shows Elio's and Oliver's rebellion. While Elio and Oliver's discovery and unleashing of their sexuality represents a rebellion, Dorian Gray grows disturbed because of a yellow book that Lord Henry Wotton lends him. Reading Lord Henry's yellow, decadent book opens the world to Dorian as he is able to overcome social prejudices, stigmas and religious dogmas so as to contemplate the world and its endless possibilities: "It was the strangest book that he had ever read. It seemed to him that in exquisite raiment, and to the delicate sound of flutes, the sins of the world were passing in dumb show before him. Things that he had dimly dreamed of were suddenly made real to him. Things of which he had never dreamed were gradually revealed" (168). Dorian is now able to decode reality not as a universal, homogeneous truth but rather as a multiplicity of truths that change depending on the experience of the self, the body and the mind. Dorian feels he has



changed by reading the book as he is now able to identify in himself “the various moods through which the world-spirit had ever passed, loving for their mere artificiality those renunciations that men have unwisely called virtue, as much as those natural rebellions that wise men still call sin” (168). Both *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *Call Me by Your Name* challenge their respective society’s values and ideals by corrupting—from the perspective of society—their characters.

Although the value of what Elio and Oliver—and Dorian Gray to a certain extent—are fighting for should be neither ignored nor undermined, the fact that, after all, they are privileged white men cannot be disregarded either. As mentioned earlier, it is far easier for Elio and Oliver to enjoy their freedom and isolate themselves as a consequence of their status as middle or upper class white men. While having to hide from the rest of the world, remaining inside the closet and loving each other in secret should never be part of the homosexual experience, it is hard to find other obstacles in Elio and Oliver’s lives. Including other categories such as class, race or education into the analysis of the homosexual experience is a key aspect in the fostering of inclusive, intersectional and democratic readings and discussions of the dangers of the closet.

Perhaps there is not a better example of how class influences the discussion of Elio and Oliver’s relationship than their trip to Rome. Just a few days away from leaving, Oliver needs to go to Rome to meet with his publisher. Aware of the possibility that they may never see each other again, Oliver invites Elio to go with him. Rome is the backdrop against which Elio and Oliver stage their freedom and unleash their sexuality. The book establishes a clear relationship between the city of Rome and ideas such as tolerance, sexual freedom, lust, heat, and high-culture. The following excerpt serves as the best example of the energy that flows through Elio’s and Oliver’s bodies and the influence that Rome has on their desire for each other:

We’d shower and go out and feel like two exposed, live wires giving off sparks each time they so much as flicked each other. Look at old houses and want to hug each one ... pass an art gallery and look for the hole in the nude, cross a face that did no more than smile our way and already initiate moves to undress the whole person and ask her, or him, or both, if they were more than one, to join us first for drinks, for dinner, anything. Find Cupid everywhere in Rome because we’d clipped one of his wings and he was forced to fly in circles. (171)

Rome’s sexually charged, electric atmosphere is the perfect context for the final chapters of Elio and Oliver’s love story. The entire city works as Elio and Oliver’s own Garden of Eden

in the same way as Monet's berm did, with the difference that Rome does not force them to hide and behave like people in exile but rather the opposite; though never alone, Rome becomes a private space in which sight-seeing and tourism become a means for Elio and Oliver to get to know each other through the city's energy and cultural vibe: "Everything about it thrilled me. I was electrified—by the chaffing, the irony, the glances, the smiles that seemed please I existed, the buoyant air ... that graced everything ... all seemed to glow with a luster at once spellbound and aroused" (183). In his 1860 novel *The Marble Faun*, Nathaniel Hawthorne describes Rome as a place where "the customs of artist-life bestow such liberty upon the sex, which is elsewhere restricted within so much narrower limits" (56). As Elio and Oliver keep visiting and admiring different parts of the city, the intensity of their sexual desire towards each other keeps growing, which is only amplified by their arrival to the bookstore in which Oliver's publisher and other Italian intellectuals are attending the reading of a writer's collection of poetry.

The book, called *Se l'amore*, seems to play the same role in Aciman's novel as Lord Henry's yellow book does in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, as evidenced by Oliver's claim that whatever he did in life was already in the poet's book and "therefore quite permissible" (180). The different poems that the poet reads change the way Elio perceives his world at home and how he compares it to life as an intellectual in Rome; the poet plays the role of a prophet, a bard, somebody who has an influence on how reality is decoded and apprehended. The figure of the poet defies society's conventions and ensures that Elio will realize and come to terms with his duality. As one of the intellectuals attending the reading says: "If the job of poetry, like that of wine, is to help us see double, then I propose another toast until we've drunk enough to see the world with four eyes" (197). It is through our duality and our experiences that we may get to actually see "who we are, what we want, where we're headed" (197); thus, the evening at the bookstore, the poems, and those whom Elio meets that day are another step in Elio's process of self-awareness.

The influence the poet seems to have on Elio's experience of reality is heightened by the fact that most of the poems were written while the poet was living in Bangkok, where "everyone is beautiful ... in an exceptionally hybrid, crossbred manner" (189). He then adds that interacting with hybrid individuals makes others "have no words either for what they stir in us or for what they seem to want from us" (189). This is another instance in which Elio is able to overcome his own limits and push the frontiers that imprison his identity, as he claims that "no one my age had ever wanted to be both man and woman—with men and women. I had wanted other men my age before and had slept with women" (25). Whereas life in B. or the

USA is synonymous with secrecy and closetedness, life in Rome unleashes Elio's true identity, that of the double, the hybrid, the cross-gendered or, in the words of Gloria Anzaldúa in *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987), "half and half, *mita' y mita*" (41), a person who does not suffer from "a confusion of sexual identity, or even from a confusion of gender" but "two in one body, both male and female" (41). This mixture of two genders in one body is what the poet found while in Bangkok. He recalls how one day he met the night clerk of the hotel in which he was staying, a person whose features were a girl's but looked like a boy at the same time. Interacting with the clerk made the poet see "veils everywhere: what I wanted, what I didn't know I wanted, what I didn't want to know I wanted, what I'd always known I wanted" (191) and made him discover aspects of his consciousness and his identity he had never been aware of; in other words, he got to know "who I am when I crave to be naked with another naked body, or when I crave to be alone in the world; who I am when every part of me seems miles and centuries apart and each swears it bears my name" (192). What the poet feels during his interaction with the male/female clerk resembles the different emotions, thoughts and fantasies that Elio experiences throughout the novel and that have been discussed in this paper.

Besides, the clerk's gender ambiguity leads to a game of masquerading and guessing in which he/she transitions from male to female in mere seconds, "transforming" her/himself in front of the poet until the clerk finally asks the poet whether he prefers her/him to be male or female, to which the poet replies: "I wanted to say, I want you as intermezzo. So I said, I want you as both, or as in between" (196). We must underline the importance of the poet's experience in Bangkok as well as the atmosphere of tolerance, respect and freedom that surrounds the entire evening; the influence of this Roman experience is key in understanding Elio's sexual impulses before and after Rome because the city validates every single thing Elio could not understand or find acceptable inside the closet:

This evening I'd stepped into a spellbound world indeed. I'd never travelled in this world. And I would love it even more once I learned how to speak its language—for it was my language, a form of address where our deepest longings are smuggled in banter, not because it is safer to put a smile on what we fear may shock, but because the inflections of desire, of all desire in this new world I'd stepped into, could only be conveyed by play. (185-186)

Having changed himself, Elio is now able to change the world by moving to his spellbound reality. As Anzaldúa says: "Thought shifts, reality shifts, gender shifts: one person metamorphoses into another in a world where people fly through the air" (92). As we have seen,

said metamorphosis takes place through experience, both physical and mental, and by means of experimenting with the self and the outside world. Most of Elio's metaphysical changes take place through his sexual fantasies and his sexual intercourse with Oliver. We must remember that Elio and Oliver's physical interactions are quite limited, which forces Elio to look for different ways in which he can interact with Oliver by using his imagination. Although the previous part of this section already showed different examples of Elio's sexual fantasies, all of them take place before Elio and Oliver have kissed each other and had sex for the first time. Even so, those are important steps in Elio's ultimate sexual awakening.

Let us take for instance the sexual innuendo established in the novel through the comparison that Elio draws between apricots and Oliver's "tight, rounded ass echoing the color and the shape of the fruit" (35). However, apricots do not only resemble Oliver's bottom insofar as they are also a metaphor of Elio's sexuality: "Mafalda would ask [Oliver] to climb a ladder with a basket and pick those [apricots] that were almost blushing with shame, she said. He would ... pick one out, and ask, Is this one blushing with shame? No, she would say, this one is too young still, youth has no shame, shame comes with age" (35). The sexual implications of apricots and peaches remain present well after Elio has already lost his virginity with Oliver. While lying in bed, Elio reaches for a peach and begins "to press it into it till the parted fruit slid down my cock" (146). Moreover, Elio realizes that "its reddened core reminded me not just of an anus but of a vagina" (146). After Elio has had an orgasm and ejaculated into the peach itself, Oliver walks into Elio's room and, after realizing what Elio has done, starts eating the peach: "I watched him put the peach in his mouth ... staring at me so intensely that I thought even lovemaking didn't go so far" (149). By eating the peach that contains Elio's semen, Oliver is placing part of Elio inside his body, becoming one in the process as Elio himself opines: "[Oliver's] gesture had said, *I believe with every cell in my body that every cell in yours must not, must never die, and if it does have to die, let it die inside my body*" (216). Therefore, ejaculation works as a way to transfer part of one's body onto that of the other person. Just like Elio ejaculates on the peach, hence reinforcing the idea that peaches and apricots are tokens of the two characters, Oliver ejaculates on Elio's chest: "I'd had him inside me barely a few hours ago and ... later he had come all over my chest, because he said he wanted to, and I let him ... and it thrilled me to watch him make faces and peak before my very eyes" (137). Nonetheless, penetration and the act of being physically inside the other person is the most powerful connection made in the novel.

Of course, the mechanics of male-male sexual intercourse involves one being inside the other, but in the case of *Call Me by Your Name*, anal penetration acquires a deeper meaning in the sense that the gap between mind and body, and the limits of the closet, are erased by making love and putting oneself inside one's partner: "Whoever said the soul and the body met in the pineal gland was a fool. It's the asshole, stupid" (141). Yet penetration also becomes a game of influence and power insofar as *Call Me by Your Name* manages to turn sex into something artistic. In terms of having influence over another person, Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* illustrates power dynamics by means of artistic expression, with the most obvious example being Dorian's portrait itself. Basil Hallward, the man in charge of producing Dorian's portrait, claims he "put too much of myself into [the painting]" (8). Since the lines that separate painting from man are progressively blurred in the novel, Basil's influence over Dorian's body is not so much artistic as it is sexual, with Basil telling Lord Henry: "Dorian Gray is to me simply a motive in art. You might see nothing in him. I see everything in him" (17). In the case of Elio and Oliver, we see a process by which the male body "appears as a passive medium on which cultural meanings are inscribed or as the instrument through which an appropriative and interpretive will determines a cultural meaning for itself" (Butler 8). From Elio and Oliver's perspective, though, their own identity is what is inscribed in each other's bodies rather than cultural meanings. Pieces of their respective identities are sent into the each other's bodies during the sexual intercourse, to the point where even their names are exchanged:

Swapping words from mouth to mouth, which was when I must have begun using obscenities that he repeated after me, softly at first, till he said, "Call me by your name, and I'll call you by mine," which I'd never done in my life and which, as soon as I said my own name as though it were his, took me to a realm I never shared with anyone in my life before, or since. (134)

This identity exchange lasts for the remainder of both characters' lives, creating ghost spots—which is the name of the last chapter of the book—where there had been memories and experiences. Even after Oliver gets married and has children as a means of closeting his secret truth forever, once he goes back to Italy and sees Elio, the pieces fall into place once again. Whereas Monet's berm, Elio's bedroom or Rome worked as tiny pieces of reality or spellbound worlds that protected their love, everything that Elio and Oliver have left at the end of the novel is the parts of their identity that the other still possesses.

Let us draw a final comparison between how the relationship between the two characters begun and how it ends. While both of them were still trapped inside the closet, Elio's biggest fear was that Oliver escaped his control. The process by which Oliver is commodified into a consumer good and a work of art allows Elio to retain some control over Oliver's actions and identity. Hence, whenever Oliver is not subjected to Elio's commodification, that is, whenever he is not seen by Elio, he can become a completely different person from the one Elio wants him to be. The following excerpt provides a clearer example of what this idea means: "Don't let [Oliver] be someone else when he's away. Don't let him be someone I've never seen before. Don't let him have a life other than the life I know he has with us, with me" (40). Hence, the moment in which Oliver calls Elio by his own name and vice versa is the moment in which they have some kind of control over each other. Of course, Oliver's departure and subsequent heterosexual life seems to render this process ultimately pointless; however, nostalgia allows both characters to live in something resembling a coma during which Elio keeps imagining Oliver as "stuck in Italy somewhere, unreal, and spectral" (234). The ending of the novel, then, brings the story full circle. Twenty years after the end of their love story, Oliver returns to B. and visits the places where his relationship with Elio was born. It is then when Elio thinks: "You're thousands of miles away but no sooner do I look at this window that I'll think of a bathing suit, a shirt thrown on on the fly, arms resting on the banister, and you're suddenly there, lighting up your first cigarette of the day—twenty years ago today. For as long as the house stands, this will be your ghost spot—and mine too, I wanted to say" (247). Even though the closet is still a shaping presence in both of their lives, the safe spots where they left part of their identity are still an alternative reality in which both men can escape the influence of the closet and society's prejudices.

All in all, *Call Me by Your Name* provides an alternative interpretation of life inside and outside the closet for the male homosexual individual and shows how male-male relationships may evolve from a homosocial bond into a homosexual one. The lack of a happy ending in which Elio and Oliver are allowed to live together gives the novel a realistic and tragic tone that portrays certain aspects of the male homosexual experience of those who were never able to come out of the closet. However, their rebellion lies in their own nostalgia, in the experiences, the memories, and the bodily sensations they had together in Italy; as Aciman himself says in his essay "Pensione Eolo" (2000): "Ultimately, the real site of nostalgia is not the place that was lost or the place that was never quite had in the first place; it is the text that must record that loss" (qtd. in D'Erasmus). By recording said nostalgia and inscribing it into their lives and

memories, Elio and Oliver are able to overcome prejudices and stigmas and—for six weeks in an Italian villa—escape the closet.

### 3. Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness*

*The Left Hand of Darkness* has always inspired “vigorous criticism and conversation about what gender is and does, both among science fiction fans and feminist scholars” (Lothian 76) due to its innovative approach to gender politics and sexual identity. By applying this paper's discussion of the homosocial/homosexual continuum and the role of hegemonic masculinity in male-male relationships to the plot of the novel, this section will attempt to provide an alternative, yet complementary, analysis of gender and sexual orientation from the one offered by André Aciman's *Call Me by Your Name*.

#### 3.1. What we talk about when we talk about aliens

In her introduction to *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969), Ursula K. Le Guin says the role of the science fiction writer is to be a liar, somebody who questions the concepts of truth and knowledge: “I talk about the gods; I am an atheist. But I am an artist too, and therefore a liar. Distrust everything I say. I am telling the truth” (24). The role of the science fiction writer as a liar does not have to do with the traditional image of the genre as related to escapism and detachment from reality as much as it reflects how sci-fi does not look for a universal, homogeneous truth but for a multiplicity of them. In this case then, lying is looking for the alternative facts or truths that remain hidden. Said multiplicity of truths can only be acquired through opposition, challenge, and originality; as John W. Campbell Jr. claims, science fiction, “unlike other literatures, assumes that change is the natural order of things” (qtd. in Harris-Fain 31). These words perfectly illustrate the rebellious ambition of Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness*, whose plot and characters defy most of the principles that Western society has always held as self-evident and universal. The aim of this first section is to discuss how the novel presents ideas that have already been analyzed in *Call Me by Your Name* such as the homosexual/homosocial continuum, power dynamics and structures, and the influence of the space of the closet. Nonetheless, *The Left Hand of Darkness* provides alternative ways for these issues to be portrayed due to the completely different relationship that its two protagonists have in comparison with Oliver and Elio.

The novel deals with an envoy called Genly Ai, a representative of a confederation of worlds called the Ekumen, that is sent to Gethen—also known as Winter in human language—to study its inhabitants and convince them to join the Ekumen. Gethen is an almost frozen planet whose inhabitants are androgynous, that is, both male and female—or neither—at the same time. The backdrop against which the novel takes place is futuristic and set in a planet



completely different from ours, which reinforces Lisa Yaszek's thoughts on the role of female science fiction writers: "Mid-century women science fiction writers who transposed gender expectations of the mid-twentieth century onto galactic futures were creating a ground on which to critique those restrictive modalities of gender and technology" (qtd. in Lothian 73). This follows the argument presented by Alexis Lothian that says that:

As multiple feminist, gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer movements and cultures have challenged conventions, expectations, and power structures that surround gender and sexuality in American culture, writers and fans of science fiction have raised questions and posed critiques about the futures of gender, sex, technology, patriarchy, and reproduction in endlessly inventive ways. (70)

As mentioned before, originality, the inventive ways in which the novel addresses issues of gender, sexuality, or power structures is what ultimately allows Le Guin to present both readers and characters with facts and truths that had always remained hidden or ignored by Western society. The story is told from two different points of view; on the one hand, Genly Ai acts as the main narrator, providing the text with a Westernized vision of the themes with which it deals. On the other hand, a Gethenian politician forced into exile known as Estraven works as Genly Ai's counterpart, bringing out Ai's prejudices, fears and, ultimately, allowing him to address his own identity thanks to the experiences they share together. The mixture of the voices of both characters, as well as the existing homosocial bond between them, allows Le Guin to portray the evolution from prejudice and homophobia to same-sex desire. Thus, without Estraven's influence, Genly Ai's evolution as an individual could never happen in the first place. Moreover, *The Left Hand of Darkness* deals with borders, barriers and dividing lines that separate the characters, but it is also a text that studies the ways in which those barriers can be overcome, and the consequences of that achievement. The novel blurs the lines that divide masculine and feminine, heterosexual and homosexual, male and female, nature and culture, and fact and fiction, as evidenced by its opening lines, where Genly Ai says:

I'll make my report as if I told a story, for I was taught as a child on my homeworld that Truth is a matter of the imagination. The story is not all mine, nor told by me alone. Indeed I am not sure whose story it is; you can judge better. But it is all one, and if at moments the facts seem to alter with an altered voice, why then you can choose the fact you like best; yet none of them is false, and it is all one story. (1)

Let us begin the analysis of *The Left Hand of Darkness* by focusing on how gender and sexuality are coded, as well as paying attention to how the idea of the closet is presented in the text. First of all, the relation between sex and gender needs to be addressed so as to be able to draw comparisons between what is assumed by Western culture and what is presented in the novel. Judith Butler argues that if we are to assume that sex does indeed mirror gender, that is, that one's sex determines one's gender, we would be reinforcing the existence of a binary gender system (5). However, Butler adds that by constructing gender as independent from sex, "gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice, with the consequence that *man* and *masculine* might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and *woman* and *feminine* a male body as easily as a female one" (6). But how does Butler's perspective on the separation between gender and sex work in *The Left Hand of Darkness*? Genly Ai, embodying Western thought and culture, is the one in charge of constructing a recognizable notion of gender. Ai, unlike Butler, does indeed find it impossible to separate gender from sex: "Though I had been nearly two years on Winter I was still far from being able to see [Gethenians] through their own eyes ... self-consciously seeing a Gethenian first as a man, then as a woman, forcing him into those categories so irrelevant to his nature and so essential to my own" (9-10). Whereas Genly Ai tries to impose on Gethenians his preconceived ideas regarding gender and sex, concepts such as male or female cannot be applied to androgynous beings such as the Gethenians. The cultural construction of gender is thus rendered pointless in Gethen since its inhabitants cannot be separated by gender or sex neither from a biological nor a cultural perspective.

Firstly, the only time in which Gethenians take on one of the two genders is during a biological process called *kemmer* where a series of hormonal changes initiate the sexual cycle. Let us take as an example a report on Gethenian sexuality made by a human scientist so as to better understand how gender is not a cultural construct in Gethen but something arbitrary: "When the individual finds a partner in *kemmer*, hormonal secretion is further stimulated ... until in one partner either a male or female hormonal dominance is established. The genitals engorge or shrink accordingly, foreplay intensifies, and the partnered ... takes on the other sexual role" (74). In the case of the Gethenians, gender seems to be a result of biological processes, something necessary for the survival of the species based on randomness rather than preconceived, fixed societal principles. Furthermore, the report on Gethenian sexuality states that "individuals have no predisposition to either sexual role in *kemmer*; they do not know whether they will be the male or the female" (74). Assuming then that Gethenians can have a certain gender or sexual orientation imposed on them is a consequence of Genly Ai's

Westernized perspective. However, one of the most interesting aspects of the novel is the way Le Guin chooses how and when to give information to both readers and characters. The scientist who wrote the report being discussed concludes that the Gethenians were an experiment carried by a previous race that attempted to colonize the planet<sup>7</sup>: “Human genetic manipulation was certainly practiced by the Colonizers ... will anything else explain Gethenian sexual physiology? Accident, possibly; natural selection, hardly. Their ambisexuality has little or no adaptive value” (73). Knowledge of the alleged origin of the Gethenians presents us with the possibility of nature being under human control, which is also interesting insofar as humans have created something that challenges the so-called “laws of nature” as Genly Ai himself claims: “Cultural shock was nothing much compared to the biological shock I suffered as a human male among human beings who were, five-sixths of the time, hermaphroditic neuters (40)”. Ai’s statement suggests that, while nature can never be fully dominated by humans, culture is indeed functional in the sense that it allows humans to dominate and alienate the Other.

Language plays a significant role in power dynamics between individuals throughout the novel; having the power to name things, to control language, is what ultimately shapes reality<sup>8</sup>. Like in the case of *Call Me by Your Name*, women in *The Left Hand of Darkness* are never allowed to participate in the linguistic process by which reality, knowledge, and the concept of truth are constructed. Therefore, Luce Irigaray argues that “the possibility of another language or signifying economy is the only chance at escaping the ‘mark’ of gender which, for the feminine, is nothing but the phallogocentric erasure of the female sex” (qtd. in Butler 26). Irigaray’s call for a reinterpretation of the signifier/signified phallogocentric dynamic works in the context of *The Left Hand of Darkness* because the status of the Gethenians as androgynous leads to a linguistic conflict since the Gethenian individual can be considered neither male nor female: “When you meet a Gethenian you cannot and must not do what a bisexual naturally does, which is to cast him in the role of Man or Woman, while adopting towards him a corresponding role dependent on your expectations” (77). Not only does this illustrate Genly Ai’s problems accepting the cultural differences between him and Gethen but it also evidences the limitations of human language when trying to come to terms with individuals whose sexual

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<sup>7</sup> The race referred to here as the Colonizers are the Hainish, who are considered the origin of all humanoid races in a series of novels written by Le Guin called the Hainish cycle.

<sup>8</sup> See Ursula K. Le Guin’s short story “She Unnames Them” (1985) based on the myth of Adam and Eve for an example of women rebelling against phallogocentric language.

identity does not fit in Western hegemonic ideals of gender: “You cannot think of a Gethenian as ‘it.’ They are not neuters. They are potentials, or integrals. I must say “he,” for the same reasons as we used the masculine pronoun in referring to a transcendent god: it is less defined, less specific, than the neuter or the feminine” (77). The masculine pronoun is thus universal, but the term does not truly embody the complexity of Gethenian identity insofar as the very act of imposing a masculine pronoun on them shapes their identity in the eye of their Western counterparts, who act as colonizers whose purpose is to deny and dialectically close every element of the colonized culture that does not belong to the narrative of what an individual represents, as Judith Butler opines: “The very notion of ‘the person’ is called into question by the cultural emergence of those ‘incoherent’ or ‘discontinuous’ gendered beings who appear to be persons but who fail to conform to the gendered norms of cultural intelligibility by which persons are defined” (17). Since “bodies cannot be said to have a signifiable existence prior to the mark of their gender” (Butler 8), using the masculine pronoun seems to be an internal mechanism of “defense” for Genly Ai to try and make sense of the biological and cultural differences between him and the Gethenians. However, in spite of Genly Ai’s attempt at shaping Gethenian identity, this is ultimately useless since Gethenians remain androgynous. Hence, there must be other ways in which Ai reacts against a reality he does not apprehend, which poses the following question: How does Genly Ai deal with both cultural and biological differences when interacting with Gethenians?

Let us recall that the first part of this paper, focused on *Call Me by Your Name*, analyzed the ways in which male-male homosocial bonds evolved into homosexual relationships and the ways in which knowledge of one’s homosexuality was negotiated between same-sex individuals. Similarly, *The Left Hand of Darkness* provides a homosocial relationship between Genly Ai and Gethenian politician Estraven that is not acknowledged by any of the characters until the end of the novel. Whereas Elio and Oliver could never freely come out of the closet due to the presence of other people and societal prejudices, Genly Ai is unable to come to terms with his own homosocial desire due to his homophobia and misogyny. Furthermore, Ai’s struggle to understand Estraven’s sexual physiology plays a significant role as well. On the one hand, Ai needs to dialectically close Estraven as either male or female, while on the other hand, Estraven is constantly shifting from one gender to another in Genly Ai’s eyes in spite of the latter’s attempts at commodifying him/her as a male: “Whenever I thought of him as a man I felt a sense of falseness, of imposture: in him, or in my own attitude towards him? His voice was soft and rather resonant but not deep, scarcely a man’s voice, but scarcely a woman’s voice

either” (10). When faced with the impossibility of imposing an identity on Estraven, Ai ends up regarding him/her as an evil and devious trickster that can never be trusted due to his/her lack of gender, qualities that are directly related to Estraven’s female side according to Ai: “I thought that ... Estraven’s performance had been womanly, all charm and tact and lack of substance, specious and adroit. Was it in fact perhaps this soft supple femininity that I disliked and distrusted in him?” (10). Ai’s words follow the idea of gender as performance outlined by Judith Butler: “Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (33). Since Estraven does not perform according to that set of repeated acts, he/she does not fall into either of the gender categories Ai tries to use to describe him/her. Unable to regard Estraven as a female as a consequence of him/her not performing as such, Ai continues to commodify Estraven as female. As mentioned before, Ai’s view of Estraven as female comes as a result of his misogynistic understanding of what female behavior should be. Ai identifies features such as weakness, intellectual inferiority, effeminacy or being a liar as part of Estraven’s femininity, claiming that he is “annoyed by this sense of effeminate intrigue” (6) that surrounds his interactions with Estraven.

We must underline the importance of the lack of concepts such as male or female in Gethen because this leads to a conversation between Genly Ai and Estraven in which the latter is curious about the human concept of woman. Genly Ai answers by highlighting how important the gender distinction is in any bisexual society: “I suppose the most important thing, the heaviest single factor in one’s life, is whether one’s born male or female. In most societies it determines one’s expectations, activities, outlook, ethics, manners” (196). Estraven then concludes that as far as there is a division of society according to an individual’s gender, there cannot be any kind of equality because one gender will always tend to try and dominate the other. Hence, Estraven asks Genly Ai whether females are actually inferior to males in any physical or mental way, to which Ai responds: “I don’t know. They don’t often seem to turn up mathematicians, or composers of music, or inventors, or abstract thinkers” (196). Many different conclusions can be drawn from Ai’s statement but the most important idea is that Ai perpetuates the traditional patriarchal conception of females as intellectually inferior whereas males are always related to reason, logic, and creativity. Even so, Genly Ai’s statement does not really seem to hold any kind of logic, mainly because Genly is basically repeating beliefs about femaleness that are part of a toxic, compulsory masculinity that he is forced to perform so as to never doubt the basic rules of his gender. This is more evident when Estraven keeps

asking about women and all Ai can answer is that he does not know anything about them: “I can’t tell you what women are like. In a sense, women are more alien to me than you are. With you I share one sex, anyhow” (196). Despite the fact that Ai spends most of the novel commodifying Estraven as female because of his obscure personality, he now chooses to regard him as male so as to avoid addressing his complete lack of understanding of gender politics and what femaleness represents; in other words, masculinity is a haven that Ai resorts to whenever he is unable to come to terms with any kind of female behavior.

If Genly Ai is exclusively able to function in a context of compulsory, hegemonic masculinity, then it is impossible for him to actually thrive in Gethenian society because he is always going to stand out as both culturally and biologically different. This leads to Ai longing “for anonymity, for sameness. I craved to be like everybody else” (6). But what does Ai mean by “everybody else” in this context? Does his longing for sameness reflect a repressed acceptance of Gethenian sexuality and gender or does sameness mean a completely different thing?

The fact that the novel takes place in a different planet from the one in which Genly Ai was born would apparently turn him into the alien as he himself claims: “I see and judge as an alien” (6). As we have already seen, biological and cultural differences reinforce Ai’s status as the Other in Gethenian society. Therefore, the concept of sameness cannot possibly entail the same meaning for Ai that it does for the Gethenians, which is why the dialectic of Same and Other is a false binary pair, an “illusion of a symmetrical difference which consolidates the metaphysical economy of phallogocentrism, the economy of the same” (Butler 103). Ai no longer possesses the linguistic power to decide who the Same and the Other are insofar as he is no longer in a phallogocentric society and, more importantly, the lack of a binary gender turns the concepts of the Other and the Same into meaningless ideas that are part of a male-dominated society as illustrated by Luce Irigaray: “The Other as well as the Same are marked as masculine; the Other is but the negative elaboration of the masculine subject with the result that the female sex is unrepresentable” (qtd. in Butler 103). But Irigaray’s definition of the female sex as the negative elaboration of the masculine would mean that femaleness is defined in direct opposition to maleness. Now, if being female means not being male, a female individual can never define herself without taking into account what being male means. Irigaray’s definition of femaleness reduces female identity to a simple opposition while male identity remains universal and infinite. This poses a problem because it is not so different from what Genly Ai is doing by imposing negative features on the Gethenians according to his phallogocentric,

misogynistic view of femaleness. If we were to accept the necessity to impose gendered features on Gethenians, we would need to avoid saying that “X is whatever Y is not”, that is, being female is whatever being male is not, so as to be able to establish a real equality between both genders. Avoiding a definition of femaleness as opposed to maleness would then lead to female identity not being as restrictive and limited as it has traditionally been.

Gethenians illustrate this point because they cannot be dialectically closed from either a biological or a cultural point of view, therefore, Gethenian identity “would qualify for the mark of the feminine in its polyvalence and in its refusal to submit to the reductive efforts of univocal signification” (103). As a result, it can be argued that Gethenian society has accomplished something resembling gender equality. Once again, the report on Gethenian sexuality offers different examples of how the citizens of Gethen do not follow traditional standards of gender behavior. First of all, “the limitation of the sexual drive to a discontinuous time-segment, and the ‘equalizing’ of it in androgyny” (78) is credited with preventing both sexual frustration and rape; in other words, Gethenian sexuality eliminates “the masculinity that rapes and the femininity that is raped” (78). By eliminating the possibility of rape, Gethenian society would apparently succeed in preventing the domination of the male individual over the female one. Rape is the ultimate way for men to deny any kind of agency that women may have, which is something that So Mayer claims in her essay “Floccinaucinihilipilification” included in Roxane Gay’s *Not That Bad* (2018): “Rape was and is a cultural and political act: it attempts to remove a person with agency, autonomy, and belonging from their community, to secrete them and separate them, to depoliticize their body by rendering it detachable, violable, nothing” (128). The lack of rape in Gethenian society would therefore prevent phallogocentric meanings from being inscribed in the body, which is no longer violable and detachable; consequently, not only is the phallus erased from the linguistic realm but it is erased altogether, preventing the possibility of rape since possessing the phallus implies the possibility of raping and dominating the Other. Commenting on rape, or the lack thereof, in Gethenian society is still important because the lack of males and females in Gethen does not prevent Le Guin from criticizing the compulsory sexuality that is part of the rape culture that has always ruled our own society.

In spite of the apparent equality that characterizes Gethen, there are multiple aspects of its society that go on to show how a complete rejection of gender inequality does not involve rejecting other forms of inequality. As much as Gethenians cannot be dialectically closed in terms of gender and Ai’s efforts to impose a gender on them are useless, Gethenian society is still ruled by binary pairs that lead to the creation of the concepts of the Same and the Other.

Estraven claims that Gethenians are dualists too, adding that “duality is an essential ... so long as there is *myself* and *the other*” (195). As mentioned before, the presence of a duality that leads to the appearance of the concepts of the Same/myself and the Other is always imprisoning for the latter, who will always be defined as a negative, an opposition. Thus, duality is something that needs to be overcome by embracing the universality of both the male and female identities in a similar way in which Gloria Anzaldúa describes her *mestizaje*: “The work of *mestiza* consciousness is to break down the subject-object duality that keeps her a prisoner” (102). Since Anzaldúa uses the idea of the *mestiza* to refer to females, it seems that this concept cannot be applied to Gethenian society due to the obvious absence of male or female individuals.

However, even in a society lacking gender distinctions, women seem to be regarded either as inferior or evil. In a conversation with Argaven, king of one of Gethen’s countries called Karhide, Genly Ai struggles to describe what a female is just like in his conversation with Estraven: “I had to use the word that Gethenians would apply only to a person in the culminant phase of *kemmer*, the alternative being their word for a female animal” (28). A very interesting technique appears at different points in the novel whenever females appear in a conversation or a debate: in a very subtle manner, Le Guin succeeds in incorporating images of women as irrelevant, inferior or evil in the eyes of the characters. In this case, women are indirectly compared to animals, which seems to be a recurring theme since Ai draws the comparison once again when analyzing the Gethenian’s avoidance of war: “[Gethenians] did not go to war. They lacked, it seemed, the capacity to mobilize. They behaved like animals, in that respect; or like women. They did not behave like men” (40). Interestingly enough, the apparent effeminate aspect of Gethenian society is also used by Genly Ai in order to undermine Gethen’s political structures. King Argaven, for instance, is described by Ai as being “less kingly, less manly than he looked at a distance among his courtiers” (24). On top of that, Argaven laughs “shrilly like an angry woman pretending to be amused” (24). But as it happens with Estraven, King Argaven equally reinforces those negative stereotypical images of femininity that Genly Ai uses in relation to Gethenians.

When discovering that most of the planets that comprise the Ekumen have bisexual societies, King Argaven claims that the existence of women turns any bisexual society into “a society of perverts”, adding: “I don’t see why human beings ... should want or tolerate any dealings with creatures so monstrously different” (28). Now, if “the answer to the problem ... between males and females, lies in healing the split that originates in the very foundation of our lives, our culture, our languages, our thoughts” (Anzaldúa 102), how can Gethenian society be



expected to fully overcome binary pairs while regarding female individuals in such a way? The truth is that it simply cannot. Women's role in the novel is secondary and any reference to their function in society presents them as inferior and devious. For example, King Argaven's depiction of females as monstrously different comes as a consequence of humans being in a perpetual state of *kemmer*, therefore, sexual desire is something that characterizes humans. Conversely, Gethenians can only prolong *kemmer* through the use of certain hormones, something unacceptable according to Gethenian values: "Excessive prolongation of the *kemmer* period, with permanent hormonal imbalance toward the male or the female, causes what they call perversion" (52). Those who are then considered perverts "are not excluded from society, but they are tolerated with some disdain, as homosexuals are in many bisexual societies" (52). That homosexuals can be included within the "pervert" category is made even more interesting by the report on Gethenian sexuality, which claims that kemmer-partners of the same sex "are so rare so as to be ignored" (74). Why should cases of same-sex desire and *kemmering* be ignored only because of their rarity? We must take into account that this is a report written by a human scientist who is judging Gethenian society from an alien perspective, which would definitely make us question how objective the report can actually be. Besides, is not the very act of ignoring, therefore closeting homosexual Gethenians, a way of imposing human (and Western) standards of sexuality on the colonized culture? Homosexuality is an example of discontinuity and incoherence according to our society's standards because it contradicts traditional values of compulsory heterosexuality as Judith Butler explains:

The specters of discontinuity and incoherence, themselves thinkable only in relation to existing norms of continuity and coherence, are constantly prohibited and produced by the very laws that seek to establish causal or expressive lines of connection among biological sex, culturally constituted genders, and the "expression" or "effect" of both in the manifestation of sexual desire through sexual practice. (Butler 17)

We already know that Estraven and the rest of the society of Gethen sees duality as something necessary, but what would be the principles, the specters of continuity and coherence that establish what should be addressed and promoted and what should remain invisible and closeted? The code of laws and principles that rules Gethenian society and the interactions between its citizens is called *shifgrethor*, defined as "prestige, face, place, the pride-relationship, the untranslatable and all-important principle of social authority" (11). *Shifgrethor* would work as an equivalent of the knowledge/lack of knowledge continuum that shaped the lives and interactions of Elio and Oliver in *Call Me by Your Name* inasmuch as it also leads to

a certain feeling of obscurity and paranoia that surrounds the entire novel. Thus, *shifgrethor* works as a means for the characters to save face and hide the meaning of their words and their actions, as well as their real identities, but also as a way of manipulating others. It is this manipulation of others which turns *The Left Hand of Darkness* into a novel of political intrigue, something resembling a detective novel where any interaction can get the protagonists in trouble. The “villain” of the novel would be Lord Tibe, the person who forces Estraven into exile and takes over as Karhide’s Prime Minister. Reflecting on his early interactions with Lord Tibe, Genly Ai says he was “trying to speak insipidly, yet everything I said to Tibe seemed to take on a double meaning” (7). What Ai needs to do in his conversations with Lord Tibe is to avoid being lied to and manipulated and to be able to lie to Tibe. The capacity to do so is what Ai calls farfetching: “What one is after when farfetching might be described as the intuitive perception of a moral entirety; and thus it tends to find expression not in rational symbols, but in metaphor (121). Lord Tibe’s smile is the metaphor that reflects the moral entirety of the character. Besides, the smile reflects the constant paranoia and the fear to be exposed that looms over the characters’ interactions: “[Lord Tibe] smiled again, and every tooth seemed to have a meaning, double, multiple, thirty-two different meanings” (7). As a result, saving face and respecting *shifgrethor* would imply having to lie and hide inside the closet, as evidenced by King Argaven’s advice to Genly Ai: “Tell your own lies, do your own deeds” (25).

Moreover, *shifgrethor* acts as a sort of closet from which the characters are unable to fully come out. Respecting *shifgrethor* involves remaining inside the space of the closet, hiding one’s identity and desires, whereas coming out of the closet, that is, avoiding *shifgrethor* would involve exposing oneself. We cannot truly assume that the moments in which Estraven and Genly Ai do not respect *shifgrethor* immediately turn their relationship into a male-male homosexual bond due to the lack of gender and sexual identity in the overall Gethenian society. Nonetheless, we can establish certain similarities between the homosexual experience inside and outside the closet and the way Estraven and Genly Ai are portrayed as exiles, outcasts and aliens. As a consequence of Lord Tibe’s political power, both Estraven and Genly Ai are forced to flee Karhide, the country where both reside at the beginning of the novel.

The second section of the analysis of *The Left Hand of Darkness* will begin by addressing Estraven’s and Ai’s experiences in Orgoreyn, the country they escape to. Orgoreyn is where the relationship between Ai and Estraven is turned into a homosocial bond in which the characters’ status as exiles and outcasts plays into their evolution as individuals. In order to analyze said evolution, this paper will pay attention to the role that nature, culture, madness and

religion play in the novel and how these concepts work in the context of the closet and the homosocial/homosexual continuum.

### **3.2. The final frontier: overcoming the fear of the Other**

As mentioned at the conclusion of the first section of the analysis, we will now pay attention to the experiences that Genly Ai and Estraven suffer once both of them have been banished from Karhide. Chilean writer Roberto Bolaño describes exile as being consigned “to limbo, to a no man’s land” (Bolaño). Further developing the concept of the no man’s land, Bolaño says that: “In Spanish *tierra de nadie* means precisely that, barren land, dead land, land where nothing lives, while in English the suggestion is that there are simply no men there, though there are other creatures, animals or insects, which makes it much nicer, I don’t mean very nice, but infinitely nicer than in the Spanish sense” (Bolaño). Both the Spanish and English definitions of the no man’s land actually work in the context of *The Left Hand of Darkness*; as we shall see, both Genly Ai and Estraven spend most of the second half of the novel in the wilderness without meeting any other characters until the last few pages of the book. On the other hand, their first experiences as exiles take place in Orgoreyn, where they interact with different characters that play a significant role in their respective fates.

Let us dwell on the idea of exile and its importance in the relationship between Estraven and Genly Ai. Exile is, first and foremost, a means for Estraven and Genly Ai to overcome the barriers that separate them. Barriers, frontiers, dividing lines, are ever present in the book, something we have already addressed in the analysis of Gethenian sexuality and gender in the previous section. The arrival of both characters in Orgoreyn and their subsequent experience in the wilderness are characterized by the shaping presence of certain ideas such as exile, patriotism, nature, madness, culture or religion. These ideas are actually frontiers, both physical and ideological, and the survival of Estraven and Genly Ai is closely related to their capacity to challenge and overcome every obstacle that appears in their way. The idea of the frontier has always been deeply entrenched in American identity ever since the arrival of the Mayflower in 1620, something that was obviously reinforced throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century by the influence of the westward movement in American thought and culture. Of course frontiers in American history represent opposing ideas most of the time; as much as the westward movement represented the pinnacle of American exceptionalism, Manifest Destiny and the progress of civilization, the idea of the frontier participates in “the representation of American political, military, and economic power as free from the corrupting burdens of history that turn it into

domination and oppression elsewhere” (Rieder 167). Furthermore, Gloria Anzaldúa also opines that physical and ideological frontiers are there to “define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish *us* from *them*” (25). But frontiers are also there to allow for ideas to be exchanged and obstacles to be overcome. The increasing importance of the science fiction genre in American literature is what allowed the pioneers, cowboys and gold-searchers of the past to evolve into astronauts exploring the limits of the known universe.

According to John Rieder, by “transferring both the symbolic and ideological values of the American frontier to outer space” (167), science fiction is reinterpreting the pioneering tradition of the United States and creating new frontiers in the process: “In American SF, outer space has long served as the ‘final frontier’ announced by Captain James Kirk in the credits sequence of *Star Trek*—“final” not because it is the last frontier, but because it promises an inexhaustible supply of them” (Rieder 169). Hence, in science fiction frontiers are not always portrayed “as an empty place waiting to be penetrated and settled by intrepid pioneers but as a meeting place between cultures or civilizations, a borderland or contact zone where there are always two sides to any story, and where exploring the radical differences between those two sides often becomes the heart of the adventure” (Rieder 167). The exploration of those radical differences is precisely the reason why the Ekumen, the confederation of planets that Genly Ai represents, was created. Genly Ai says that the main goal of the Ekumen is: “Material profit. Increase of knowledge. The augmentation of the complexity and intensity of the field of intelligent life. The enrichment of harmony and the greater glory of God. Curiosity. Adventure. Delight” (26). The mission of the Ekumen does not only work for the confederation, as it works in both directions, highlighting the existence of frontiers as areas of cultural exchange and mutual understanding: “I thought it was for [the Gethenians’] sake that I came alone, so obviously alone, so vulnerable, that I could in myself post no threat, change no balance: not an invasion, but a mere messenger-boy. But there’s more to it than that. Alone, I cannot change your world. But I can be changed by it. Alone, I must listen, as well as speak” (218). Although the illuminating mission of the Ekumen seems to encourage progress, we must take into account both versions of the same story and analyze how the Gethenians react against said multicultural exchange. It is important to analyze the events that lead to Ai’s and Estraven’s banishment so as to be able to fully understand the bond that appears as a consequence and that finally leads to the creation of a homosocial relationship between the two characters.

Let us then begin by discussing how the possibility of a deal between the Ekumen and Gethen is regarded in the first few chapters of the novel and how different political intrigues,

betrayals and fear of the Other are what lead to both the banishment of Estraven and the marginalization of Genly Ai. In the case of the latter, the biological and cultural differences that we have already analyzed result in Ai's isolation from the rest of Gethenian society and his identification of Estraven as a stranger: "I was alone, with a stranger, inside the walls of a dark palace, in a strange snow-changed city, in the heart of the Ice Age of an alien world" (14). However, Estraven begins to present himself as Ai's only ally in his search for a common ground with the Gethenians, explaining that Ai's isolation does not come as a result of biological differences as much as it has to do with something more culturally-constructed like patriotism and nationalism. In fact, Estraven defines patriotism not as the love of one's homeland but as "the fear of the other. And its expressions are political, not poetical: hate, rivalry, aggression. It grows in us, that fear. It grows in us year by year. We've followed our road too far. And you, who hardly know what I'm talking about, who shows us the new road—" (15). Genly Ai is the one responsible for showing the Gethenians a new road, that is, a new way of reacting against new, unconventional ideas and cultures, but the Gethenians react against him precisely out of fear for everything he stands for. Thus, Estraven's definition of patriotism as fear of the Other perfectly summarizes the two directions in which a frontier, ideological or physical, can work.

Let us take for instance the reason why Estraven is banished in the first place; King Argaven declares that Estraven's exile is a result of his betrayal of his own country, "having urged privily and openly ... that the Nation-Dominion of Karhide cast away its sovereignty and surrender up its power in order to become an inferior and subject nation in a certain Union of Peoples" (23). King Argaven holds the maximum authority in Karhide, he therefore embodies the law, culture, thought and politics; in other words, Argaven himself is what Julia Kristeva calls the law of the father. Kristeva establishes that the individual's experience of reality is divided in two different levels or realms that are the semiotic and the symbolic. On the one hand, the symbolic realm is ruled by the law of the father, a symbol of the phallogocentric patriarchal system that promotes hegemonic heterosexuality and the subjugation of women and the LGBTQ community. Kristeva then adds that "culture is equivalent to the Symbolic, that the Symbolic is fully subsumed under the "Law of the Father"" (qtd. in Butler 85). This follows Gloria Anzaldúa's description of culture as the root of patriarchal tyranny: "Culture forms our beliefs. We perceive the version of reality that it communicates. Dominant paradigms, predefined concepts that exist as unquestionable, unchallengeable, are transmitted to us through the culture. Culture is made by those in power—men" (38). On the other hand, the semiotic

level would have a direct influence of pre-social, pre-patriarchal memories and experiences of the self. The semiotic level would be the level of the mother and the womb, where the phallus does not have any influence on how reality is experienced by the body. Hence, the law of the father that King Argaven represents symbolizes the fear of the Other that we have already mentioned. The significance of this argument is underlined by King Argaven's explanation of why he is afraid of Genly Ai and the Ekumen:

I do fear you, [Genly Ai]. I fear those who sent you. I fear liars, and I fear tricksters, and worst I fear the bitter truth. And so I rule my country well. Because only fear rules men. Nothing else works. You are what you say you are, yet you're a joke, a hoax. There's nothing between the stars and the void and terror and darkness, and you come out of that all alone trying to frighten me. But I am already afraid, and I am the king. Fear is king! (31)

It would seem that by being banished to Orgoreyn, Genly Ai and Estraven can escape the symbolic realm and the law of the father, thus being allowed to be free and live their lives without taking into account the principles and rules of Argaven's law. However, political power seems to be always representative of the law of the father in the novel insofar as it is always going to promote fear and the rejection of new ideas and possibilities. Although they arrive separately in Orgoreyn, both Genly Ai and Estraven end up establishing relations with the Orgota government, also known as the Commensals. In order to convince the Orgota to accept Genly Ai's of a treaty between them and the Ekumen, Estraven portrays Genly Ai as the opportunity to put an end to the physical and ideological barriers that isolate Gethenian society from the rest of the universe: "In [Genly Ai's] presence, lines drawn on the earth make no boundaries, and no defense. Our border now is no line between two hills, but the line our planet makes in circling the Sun. To stake shifgrethor on any lesser chance is a fool's doing, now" (71). *Shifgrethor* emerges, once again, as an obstacle in the progress of Gethenian society, an ideological barrier that neither Estraven nor Genly Ai are able to overcome. The Orgota, just like King Argaven before them, decide not to trust the Ekumen. According to Estraven, this decision comes as consequence of the fear the Orgota feel:

Fear undoes [Genly Ai's] mission and my hope, once more. Not fear of the alien, the unearthly, not here. There Orgota have not the wits nor size of spirit to fear what is truly and immensely strange. They cannot even see it. They look at the man from another

world and see what? A spy from Karhide, a pervert, an agent, a sorry little political Unit like themselves. (132)

As much as fear of a possible Karhidish invasion seems to be the real reason behind the decision to turn down Genly Ai's offer, the importance of Ai's sexuality in the decision-making process cannot be overlooked. For instance, one of the ways an Orgota politician tries to attack the proposal is by highlighting the sexual differences between the Orgota and Genly Ai: "Don't you see, Commensals, what all this is? It is ... a public mockery of our credulity, our gullibility, our stupidity—engineered ... by this person who stands here before us today. You know he comes from Karhide. You know he is a Karhidish agent. You can see he is a sexual deviant of the type that in Karhide ... is left uncured" (130). The words of the Orgota politician trigger the evolution of Genly Ai as a character inasmuch as they have many ramifications. First of all, Genly Ai's identity is now defined in relation to his sexual deviancy, that is, he is being labelled as a social outcast that goes against the standards of normality set by the entire Gethenian society, something Ai had previously done in his reflections on Gethenian androgyny and his imposition of misogynistic views of femininity on characters such as Estraven that threatened his own vision of reality. Next, the Orgota fear is not as simple as Estraven wants it to be; can we really say that there is no fear of the Other in Orgota society when there are two different types of Other in the words of the Orgota Commensal? Genly Ai is "othered" due to his bisexuality, whereas the citizens of Karhide are portrayed as enemies because of physical and ideological barriers that separate both countries. Hence, if we assume that the words of the Orgota politician are a result of his patriotism, then patriotism is indeed based on the fear, hatred and oppression of the Other. We must take into account that the Orgota politician is also claiming that Ai's sexual deviancy should be cured, which is supported by the entire Orgota government when Genly Ai is sent to a concentration camp also known as "the Farm" where, by means of different drugs, prisoners are kept out of *kemmer*: "Prisoners who had been there for several years were psychologically and I believe to some extent physically adapted to this chemical castration. They were as sexless as steers. They were without shame and without desire, like the angels. But it is not human to be without shame and without desire" (149). In fact, saying that the prisoners are angels rather than humans perfectly illustrates the dehumanization of the deviant individual, that is, the one who is not considered to be normal, sane, or healthy according to social standards, which follows the history, according to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "of the mortal suppression, legal or subjudicial, of gay acts and gay people, through burning, hounding, physical and chemical castration, concentration camps, bashing"

(*Epistemology* 128). In the case of *The Left Hand of Darkness*, sexual deviancy works in the same way as homosexuality would in our own society since the direct relation between sexual deviancy and madness is equally similar to the homosexuality-madness relation.

Once it is clear that there is a direct relation between madness and sexual deviancy in the novel, we must look at other reasons why an individual may be labelled as mad in *The Left Hand of Darkness*. Let us recall how the analysis of *Call Me by Your Name* has previously shown how travelling to another country—or planet, in the case of *The Left Hand of Darkness*—is an opportunity for the traveler to explore his or her sexuality and come out of the closet, which leads Ruth Vanita to claim that “opposition to homosexuality often takes the form of blaming other cultures for importing it into one’s supposedly pristine society” (99). We could also add being a traitor to one’s nation as a reason why one can be considered to be mentally imbalanced or dangerous to the status quo in Gethenian society because while Genly Ai is sent to the Farm, Estraven remains an exile who is defined exclusively due to his status as a traitor: “It is hard, I found, to be called a traitor. Strange how hard it is, for it’s an easy name to call another man; a name that sticks, that fits, that convinces. I was half convinced myself” (60). The next step in the oppression of the mad or deviant individual is for him or her to internalize his or her “disease,” which shapes the individual’s identity as in the case of Estraven: “[Estraven] was quiet, subdued, reduced—a banished man living off his wits in a foreign land” (100). It is worth remembering how this dehumanization of the individual and the different portrayals of madness and deviancy all take place inside the realm of the symbolic, that is, under the law of the father.

Let us see now how Estraven and Genly Ai may be able to escape the realm of the symbolic, seize control of their identities, and define themselves without the shaping presence of social stigmas. If earlier on both Anzaldúa and Kristeva identified culture as one of the roots of patriarchal domination, then they are promoting the nature/culture dichotomy in which culture is inherently masculine whereas nature is characterized as female. Reflecting on the nature/culture discourse, Judith Butler says that “as in the existential dialectic of misogyny, this is yet another instance in which reason and mind are associated with masculinity and agency, while the body and nature are considered to be the mute facticity of the feminine” (37). Although establishing yet another dichotomy that places femaleness as defined in opposition to maleness has already being proved both flawed and problematic, it seems that the nature-as-female/culture-as-male dichotomy has been a recurrent theme in American literature and visual



cultures<sup>9</sup>. Moreover, the way in which the connection between nature and human beings is coded in the novel actually reinforces the nature/culture dichotomy due to the characters being able to finally escape the symbolic order through their experiences in the wilderness.

However, there are two elements in the novel that seem to add a new level to the nature/culture dichotomy. Religion and paganism play important roles in the relation between nature and culture as they do not belong to neither of these categories but exist in the lines that separate both elements. Gethen does not have an official religion but a mixture of different myths, legends and cults known as the Handdara, “a religion without institution, without priests, without hierarchy, without vows, without creed; I am still unable to say whether it has a God or not” (45). Those who take the place of the priests in this religion are the Foretellers, a group of individuals resembling the oracles of the Greek and Roman mythologies. The Handdara is not part of Gethenian culture because it appeared before society itself; its origins are *primaeval*, so it precedes the emergence of the patriarchal order and the law of the father; hence, we could say that the Handdara is closer to the semiotic realm rather than the symbolic, existing independently from anything that may be controlled by the phallus: “Under [Gethen’s] politics and parades and passion runs an old darkness, passive, anarchic, silent” (49). Of course, the fact that the Handdara and the Foretellers exist as an entity that is not ruled by the law of the father turns them into a threat to the status quo. Just like Estraven and Genly Ai have been previously labelled as mad or deviant, the Foretellers undergo the same process of dehumanization, mainly because they are labelled as schizophrenics and psychopaths once it is discovered that some of them have the capacity to divide time and are in a constant state of *kemmer*: “Some Foretelling groups artificially arouse perversion in a normal person—injecting female or male hormones during the days before a session” (52). If the Foretellers are able to divide time, that is, they are able to fragment reality and escape the control of anything that may imprison the body and the self, then they are capable of transcending their own body, becoming what Scottish psychiatrist R.D. Laing called the unembodied self:

In this position the individual experiences his self as being more or less divorced or detached from his body. *The body is felt more as one object among other objects in the world than as the core of the individuals own being.* Instead of being the core of his true

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<sup>9</sup> See George Miller’s *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015) or Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985) and *Oryx and Crake* (2003) for interesting takes on the relation between ecofeminism, futuristic scenarios and patriarchal dominance that share some similarities with *The Left Hand of Darkness*.

self, the body is felt as the core of a *false self*, which a detached, disembodied, ‘inner’, ‘true’ self looks on at with tenderness, amusement, or hatred as the case may be. (69)

However, Laing then notes that although the schizophrenic individual does indeed possess the capacity to transcend reality by detaching him or herself from the body, this renders him or her completely helpless: “Although the self has an attitude of freedom and omnipotence, its refusal to commit itself to ‘the objective element’ renders it impotent: it has no freedom *in* ‘reality’” (89). In the case that the Foretellers could actually be labelled as schizophrenics, they could not really enjoy the freedom that their transcendence of reality and body would provide them, but the different descriptions of the rituals of the Foretellers goes to show the extent of their power, which is close to the concept of *la facultad* outlined by Gloria Anzaldúa: “*La facultad* is the capacity to see in surface phenomena the meaning of deeper realities, to see the deeper structure below the surface. It is an acute awareness mediated by the part of the psyche that does not speak” (60). Anzaldúa follows this with an explanation of those who possess *la facultad*: “Those who are pushed by the tribe for being different are likely to become more sensitized. Those who are pounced on the most have it the strongest—the females, the homosexuals of all races, the darkskinned [sic], the outcast, the persecuted, the marginalized, the foreign” (60). We must emphasize how Anzaldúa’s concept of *la facultad* cannot be really compared to the symptoms a person suffering from schizophrenia may have; nonetheless, the detachment of the self from the body and the reality it inhabits are common to both experiences. This is why the importance that R.D. Laing’s studies on schizophrenia have in the analysis of the novel should not be overlooked.

For instance, some of the patients whose stories Laing describes in *The Divided Self* (1955) suffered from both paranoia and hallucinations<sup>10</sup>. Those hallucinations, which tend to be terrifying for the patient, usually lead to the detachment of the individual from the body, which then causes the sensation of helplessness. Something similar happens to Genly Ai when he connects at a mystical level with the Foretellers in the midst of one of their rituals: “They were all connected, all of them, as if they were the suspension-points of a spider web. I felt, whether I wished or not, the connection, the communication that ran, wordless, inarticulate” (53). Ai becomes the unembodied self by becoming one with the Foretellers; there is no longer a distinction between self and Other just like there is no distinction between Genly Ai and the other Foretellers: “I tried to keep out of contact with the minds of the Foretellers. I was made

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<sup>10</sup> See the case of a patient called Joan that Laing discusses in Chapter 10 of *The Divided Self*.

very uneasy by that silent electric tension, by the sense of being drawn in, of becoming a point or figure in the pattern, in the web. But when I set up a barrier, it was worse” (53). As we see, Genly Ai tries to react against said connection because he feels overwhelmed and scared. This is immediately followed by a series of hallucinations in which Ai feels “surrounded by great gaping pits with ragged lips, vaginas, wounds, hellmouths” (54) that do nothing but reinforce Ai’s feeling of helplessness: “I felt cut off and cowered inside my own mind obsessed by hallucinations of sight and touch, a stew of wild images and notions, abrupt visions and sensations all sexually charged and grotesquely violent, a red-and-black seething of erotic rage” (54). What is terrifying in the eyes of Genly Ai is magical according to Gloria Anzaldúa: “There is a magic aspect in abnormality and so-called deformity. Maimed, mad, and sexually different people were believed to possess supernatural powers by primal-cultures’ magico-religious thinking” (41). It is also pretty telling that what threatens Ai are images that defy the notion of the phallus such as vaginas, elements that do not belong to the symbolic realm of the law of the father but to the semiotic level of the mother. As a matter of fact, Faxe, leader of the Foretellers, turns into a female in the middle of the ritual, which would ultimately place the Foretellers in direct opposition to embodiments of the phallogocentric symbolic level such as King Argaven or the Orgota Commensals: “Hours and seconds passed, the moonlight shone on the wrong wall, there was no moonlight, only darkness, and in the center of all darkness Faxe: the Weaver: a woman, a woman dressed in light. The light was silver, the silver was armor, an armored woman with a sword” (54). Faxe, becoming a goddess, is a symbol of female empowerment in a novel whose protagonist spends most of the story promoting negative standards of femininity. Even though Genly Ai would apparently possess some of the features that comprise the aforementioned concept of *la facultad*, most of his prejudices are still limiting his experience of the world. Whenever a character or an experience threatens to present Genly Ai with a set of truths and experiences that will undoubtedly challenge most of his principles, Ai’s prejudices appear and function as a haven for him to comfortably remain isolated in his own world.

Let us briefly comment once again on the role of Faxe as a sort of goddess and what it represents. In *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Gloria Anzaldúa uses Aztec goddess *Coatlicue* as a symbol of female empowerment, “the mountain, the Earth Mother who conceived all celestial beings out of her cavernous womb. Goddess of birth and death, *Coatlicue* gives and takes away life; she is the incarnation of cosmic processes” (68). Also, *Coatlicue*, just like Medusa the Gorgon in the Greek mythology, “is a symbol of the fusion of opposites: the eagle and the serpent, heaven and the underworld, life and death, mobility and immobility, beauty and horror”

(69). Whereas the law of the father embodied by characters such as King Argaven is ruled by fear and a single, universal narrative of reality that must be respected by all citizens, Faxé, in the role of the goddess and *Coatlicue*, represents the fusion of opposites and the disappearance of a single explanation of reality. Faxé, and the entire Handdara religion, ultimately represent the unknown, “the unfortold, the unproven, that is what life is based on. Ignorance is the ground of thought. Unproof is the ground of action” (58). As Faxé claims, there is only one question that can be asked whose answer we already know: “The only thing that makes life possible is permanent, intolerable uncertainty: not knowing what comes next” (58). Faxé’s words portray human beings existing in a state of in-betweenness, shifting between knowledge and lack of knowledge, light and darkness. In fact, the title of the novel is a reference to the light/darkness duality with which a Gethenian poem deals:

*Light is the left hand of darkness  
And darkness the right hand of light.  
Two are one, life and death, lying  
Together like lovers in kemmer,  
Like hands joined together,  
Like the end and the way. (195)*

Although the poem presents both light and darkness as halves that cannot exist without the presence of the other, Gloria Anzaldúa believes that one of the two sides should prevail: “Let us hope that the left hand, that of darkness, of femaleness, of ‘primitiveness,’ can divert the indifferent, right-handed, ‘rational’ suicidal drive that, unchecked, could blow us into acid rain in a fraction of a millisecond” (91). If we accept Anzaldúa’s argument of the left hand of darkness as inherently feminine and vital to the experience of reality, then Genly Ai and Estraven can only overcome the prejudices that have turned into outcasts by embracing light and not darkness.

The last section of the analysis of Le Guin’s novel will explore the relation between the landscape and the individual. Unlike in the case of Elio and Oliver in *Call Me by Your Name*, the presence of a homosexual relationship between Genly Ai and Estraven is subtle at best, although the main goal of the discussion will be to study how the characters are able to seize control over their identities by establishing a bond between them that presents a different version of the homosocial continuum from the one that can be found in André Aciman’s book.

### 3.3. Coming out by coming back

Let us move on to the experiences that Estraven and Genly Ai live during their journey through the Ice. After Estraven helps Genly Ai escape the Farm, they decide to cross a frozen region of the planet that separates Orgoreyn from Karhide so that Genly Ai can send a message to the Ekumen and ask for help. It is in the Ice, “a white the eyes could not look on” (182), where Genly Ai and Estraven are able to start ignoring *shifgrethor*, which involves no lies and no pretending. As a result, Genly Ai is finally able to see how Estraven truly is: “I looked at Estraven, stretched out sound asleep on his sleeping-bag a couple of feet from me. I saw him now defenseless and half-naked in a colder light, and for the first time saw him as he was” (167). Likewise, Estraven is able to reflect on Ai’s personality without the haunting presence of *shifgrethor*: “There is a frailty about him. He is all unprotected, exposed, vulnerable, even to his sexual organ, which he must carry always outside himself” (190). Apparently, the Ice has a democratic power that places both characters on the same level without one being able to dominate the other: “[Genly Ai] is no more an oddity, a sexual freak, than I am; up here on the Ice each of us is singular, isolate, I as cut off from those like me, from my society and its rules, as he is from his. We are equals at last, equal, alien, alone” (194). Nonetheless, the process by which both characters feel comfortable in each other’s presence and are able to drop their respective prejudices towards each other—mostly in the case of Genly Ai—is rather slow.

Although both of them share their status as outcasts and exiles, the gender and sexual barriers seem to be unavoidable for Genly Ai, for whom considering Estraven a friend is almost impossible: “A friend. What is a friend, in a world where any friend may be a lover at a new phase of the moon? Not I, locked in my virility: no friend of [Estraven], or any other of his race. Neither man nor woman, neither and both, cyclic, lunar, metamorphosing under the hand’s touch ... they were no flesh of mine, no friends; no love between us” (177). The fact that Genly Ai is locked in his virility forces him into the standards of masculinity that are demanded and expected of him. In the context of a possible homosexual desire towards Estraven, his virility seems to force Genly Ai back into the closet as well, breaking with his homophobia the continuum that would lead his and Estraven’s homosocial desire to a homosexual relationship. If Genly Ai refuses to be friends with Estraven due to the possibility of Estraven becoming a male during *kemmer*, then how does he react when the Gethenian that is trying to have sex with him turns into a female during *kemmer*?

Let us take for instance the moment Genly Ai and other prisoners are being taken to the Farm by train. Lying on the floor, Genly Ai is next to a Gethenian in full *kemmer* that starts a conversation with him. Unable to see whether the Gethenian has become male or female, a shaft of light ultimately reveals that the Gethenian has indeed turned into a female: “I saw a girl, a filthy, pretty, stupid, weary girl looking up into my face as she talked, smiling timidly, looking for solace. The one time any of them asked anything of me, and I couldn’t give it” (144). Now, we may interpret Genly Ai’s inability to have sex as either a consequence of his weakness during the trip to the Farm or as a consequence of his inability to forget the Gethenian’s androgyny due to what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick calls “male homosexual panic” (*Epistemology* 138). Sedgwick relates the presence of homosexual panic in the heterosexual individual’s behavior as part of the presentation of same-sex desire as a taboo or an obscure temptation. She traces the idea of same-sex desire as temptation back to the Hellenic ideal, whose “reintegrative power is supposed to involve a healing of the culturewide ruptures involved in male homosexual panic, necessarily has that panic so deeply at the heart of its occasions” (*Epistemology* 138). Furthermore, Sedgwick presents modern homosexual panic not as a “temporally imprisoning obstacle” but as the “latent energy that can hurtle [the homosexual individual] far beyond [his or her] present place of knowledge” (*Epistemology* 139). Thus, the panic that the male individual feels when faced when his own latent, unaddressed homosexual desire is what ultimately allows him to expand his own knowledge of reality, but of course the different obstacles that are there to prevent the appearance of said expanding knowledge cannot be avoided.

For instance, gender is one of the main obstacles Genly Ai seems unable to fully overcome. As mentioned several times throughout the paper, gender is a performance in which the individual has to act according to the aforementioned standards. For instance, Genly Ai’s refusal to cry in front of Estraven is a clear act of performative manhood: “[Genly Ai] looked ready to cry, but did not. I believe he considers crying either evil or shameful. Even when he was very ill and weak, the first days of our escape, he hid his face from me when he wept. Reasons personal, racial, social, sexual—how can I guess why Ai must not weep?” (191). Moreover, Ai’s subsequent refusal to accept that he was indeed about to cry seems almost parodic insofar as his justification for not crying is reminiscent of the worst features of hegemonic masculinity: “Then I felt like crying, but refrained. Estraven was not as strong as I was, and it would not be fair, it might make him cry too” (226). Ai justifies not crying by using Estraven’s alleged effeminacy, portraying femininity as weak and submissive yet again.

Moreover, if we assume that Genly Ai also attaches those negative features to a male homosexual identity, then his justification for not crying in front of Estraven would follow Sedgwick's idea of "the scapegoating crystallization of a same-sex male desire that is widespread and in the first place internal" as a means to maintain "male heterosexual identity and modern masculinist culture" (*Epistemology* 85)<sup>11</sup>.

Although Genly Ai seems unable to overcome his prejudices, the Ice that surrounds both characters works as a metaphor of the state of their interactions with one another. This means that there is a direct relation between how the characters behave and evolve and the landscape. Just like Genly Ai needs to be careful with his actions so as to avoid violating the standards of masculinity that define his identity, he cannot walk along the Ice as comfortably as he would like: "For hours one of us hauled while the other guided, mincing along like a cat on eggshells. Every footfall was a surprise, a drop or a jolt. No shadows. An even, white, soundless sphere: we moved inside the ball, and nothing was outside it. But there were cracks in the glass" (223). Just like there are fractures in the Ice, there comes a point in the trip in which cracks start to appear in the closet that keeps Genly's real identity trapped. Step by step, the different layers that cover the character's real motivations and desires start to come off, just like he is able to advance in the Ice little by little: "Probe and step, probe and step. Probe for the invisible cracks through which one might fall out of the white glass ball, and fall, and fall, and fall" (223). This process of deconstruction of the self allows Genly Ai to finally recognize that his refusal to cry came as a result of fear of not living up to the masculinity standards: "Somewhere in the notes Estraven wrote during our trek across the Gobrin Ice he wonders why his companion is ashamed to cry. I could have told him even then that it was not shame so much as fear" (239). Since Genly Ai is now able to ignore the male/female dichotomy that he has perpetuated throughout the novel, he is able to evolve and embrace his relationship with Estraven.

Moreover, falling through the cracks implies challenging the taboos that prevent the homosocial bond between Estraven and Genly Ai from happening; in fact, the appearance of those cracks in reality triggers a feeling of joy in Genly Ai that transcends reason and logic: "I certainly wasn't happy. Happiness has to do with reason, and only reason earns it. What I was given the thing you can't earn, and can't keep, and often don't even recognize at the time; I

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<sup>11</sup> Sedgwick further elaborates her point by using the example of "the college football coach's ritualistic scapegoating and abjection of his team's 'sissy' (or worse) personality traits" as examples of the need to highlight one's manliness in comparison to a homosexual male (*Epistemology* 85).

mean joy” (203). Despite this, the very act of portraying this moment of liberation as a fall through a hole shows how difficult it is to “sustain the transgression of one’s own internal limits” (Dean 70). The difficulty to transgress is evidenced by Genly Ai and Estraven’s first sexual encounter, where Genly Ai says: “I expect it will turn out that sexual intercourse is possible between Gethenian double-sexed and ... one-sexed human beings” (208). Though real, the possibility of the homosocial bond evolving into an actual same-sex relationship is still dangerous and depicted as a crisis—of masculinity, heterosexuality, principles and morality—by Genly Ai: “Estraven and I proved nothing except perhaps a rather subtle point. The nearest to crisis that our sexual desires brought us was on a night early in the journey, our second night up on the Ice” (208). Just like they must be careful with how they walk across the Ice, the characters have to be careful with how they approach each other’s sexuality because as much as the Ice may play a role in helping avoid *shifgrethor* and social prejudices, the influence that these have is still shaping the relationship between both characters. Once again, the Ice places the characters on the same level, stripping them of their prejudices, ideas, and even their social identity, creating a connection between both individuals, “a process of different subjects knowing one another and beginning one another anew only from the living boundaries of the other: a multiple and inexhaustible course with millions of encounters and transformations of the same into the other and into the in-between” (Cixous 883). This metaphysical connection leads to the acceptance of the Other and the subsequent disappearance of the fear the concepts of Same and Other create as Genly Ai himself says:

Estraven’s face in the reddish light was as soft, as vulnerable, as remote as the face of a woman who looks at you out of her thoughts and does not speak. And I saw then again ... what I had always been afraid to see, and had pretended not to see in him: that he was a woman as well as a man. Any need to explain the sources of that fear vanished with the fear; what I was left with was, at last, acceptance of him as he was. Until then I had rejected him, refused him his own reality. (209)

In spite of the evolution of both characters, the successful avoidance of *shifgrethor*, and the connection that has been created between both characters, sexual intercourse is something that is still seemingly impossible: “For us to meet sexually would be to meet once more as aliens. We had touched, in the only way we could touch. We left it at that. I do not know if we were right” (210). That single touch is all the physical contact that Estraven and Genly Ai allow themselves to have; Genly Ai’s complete acceptance of Estraven and the differences that exist between them is still not enough for them to connect at a physical, sexual level. In the same



way in which Elio and Oliver were never able to have a happy ending to their love story and had to content themselves with creating an alternative reality for six weeks in their Italian villa, Estraven and Genly Ai can never fulfill their sexual desires. Even so, Genly Ai claims that “now that the barriers were down, the limitation, in my terms, of our converse and understanding seemed intolerable to me” (210). If neither of them can connect with the other at a physical level, then the only option available is for them to connect at a mystical, metaphysical level like the Foretellers do through their rituals.

Just like the Foretellers establish a connection between one another and are able to detach themselves from their bodies and the reality that surrounds them, Genly Ai is able to transcend human communication through his knowledge of mindspeech. Ai claims that one cannot intentionally lie while mindspeaking (56), which means that one is forced to expose him/herself and his/her true identity; those who mindspeaking cannot closet their own truth, thus exposing all their secrets. Genly Ai says that for him to be able to connect with Estraven and mindspeaking with him/her, he needs to “get through to him first” (211); in other words, Genly Ai has to penetrate Estraven’s mind so as to get to truly know him/her. The intimacy that appears as a result of Genly Ai’s penetration produces “an inarticulate sound of fear that had in it a slight edge of satisfaction” (214) in Estraven, who tells Genly Ai to call him/her by his/her name: “Call me by my name. If you can speak inside my skull ... then you can call me by my name!” (213), which prompts Genly Ai’s reply: “Bespeak me, [Estraven]. Call me by my name” (214). While Elio and Oliver call themselves by each other’s name as a means of becoming one another in *Call Me by Your Name*, the uttering of the other’s name accomplishes a similar goal in *The Left Hand of Darkness*. Now that they have penetrated each other’s minds and created a truly powerful connection that could not be achieved at a physical level, Estraven and Genly Ai are no longer opposites with ideological and physical barriers in between.

The ending of the novel, in which Estraven and Genly Ai succeed in going back to Karhide only for the former to be assassinated at the Karhidish border, further illustrates the power of the connection that was created on the Ice. While holding Estraven’s head in his hands, Genly Ai tries to mindspeak with him one last time: “But he never answered me; only in a way he answered my love for him, crying out through the silent wreck and tumult of his mind as consciousness lapsed” (238). As mentioned earlier in the analysis of the novel, the homosocial/homosexual continuum is never addressed, with the story providing subtle hints at the desire between the two protagonists. It is only after their journey across the Ice and their

experiences there that Genly Ai is finally able to, on the one hand, get to know Estraven and, on the other hand, embrace his love for him/her.

By coming back to Karhide, we could argue that both Estraven and Genly Ai are able to come out. Not simply to come out of the closet, but also to come out of every single category, label and identity they had imposed on each other and had had imposed by others. Genly Ai's thoughts after returning to Karhide summarize his feelings after the experiences in the Ice: "I had, if anything, a vague feeling all the time of liberation, of having got beyond something, of joy" (227). By the end of the novel, Genly Ai is a similar character to that of the *mestiza* in *Borderlands/La Frontera*, someone who, according to Gloria Anzaldúa, "is able to work out the clash of cultures through (r)evolution" (103). So much so, that Ai's (r)evolution causes him to feel estranged from his own people, which goes to show how much beyond his former identity he has gotten thanks to his experiences with Estraven. When the rest of the Ekumen arrive in Gethen at the end of the novel, they all look strange to him, "men and women, well as I knew them. Their voices sounded strange: too deep, too shrill. They were like a troupe of great, strange animals, of two different species; great apes with intelligent eyes, all of them in rut, in kemmer" (248). If the analysis of *Call Me by Your Name* showed how Elio was able to keep parts of Oliver framed as artistic objects, memories and experiences, Genly Ai is able to "save" Estraven by keeping part of him/her deeply entrenched in his own experience of the world.

As a conclusion, Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* is a novel that tells us "about the other worlds out among the stars" and "the other kinds of men, the other lives" (252), deconstructing and reshaping the way the characters understand and function in reality. The novel's approach towards gender and sexual identity shows how both elements end up representing ideological barriers that divide individuals and lead to the domination of homosexuals and women under the law of the father and the presence of the phallus. Moreover, Le Guin's novel provides an alternative analysis of the dynamics of the homosocial/homosexuality continuum to the one presented by André Aciman's *Call Me by Your Name*, placing the homosocial desire between its protagonists against a futuristic backdrop that invites us to question the multiple meanings the concepts of the alien and the Other have.

#### 4. Conclusion

The exploration of the different ways in which hegemonic, toxic standards of masculinity and the presence of the closet shape the lives of homosexual men has revealed the significance of an analysis based on the study of how gender and sexuality are used by patriarchal society so as to force the homosexual individual to remain inside the closet. We have paid attention not only to the experiences and interactions of the different characters but to their thoughts, contradictions and crises too, which has shown the ways the characters evolve and get to know who they really are.

The theoretical background of the paper is built around the idea that the homosexual experience portrayed in both novels is a journey along the homosociality/homosexuality continuum. Said journey can be interrupted or curbed by the presence of different disruptive elements whose purpose is to dehumanize and alienate the male homosexual individual. Namely, the paper has paid close attention to the way in which knowing or not knowing about somebody's homosexuality is related to the Lacanian concept of the gaze, which at the same time provides the characters with both pleasure and pain, depending on whether the gaze is seen as a threatening presence or not. Moreover, the knowledge/lack of knowledge continuum is often influenced by the characters themselves, who may decide to either hide their homosexuality for fear of social stigmas and prejudices, or might prefer to repress their homosexual tendencies so as to perpetuate standards of compulsory heterosexuality.

Drawing comparisons between André Aciman and Ursula K. Le Guin, whose texts may not seem to share many characteristics, has been challenging due to the temporal and geographical distances between them, as well as the genre that each author chose for their respective novels. Finding similarities between the science fiction story of a man who struggles to come to terms with the androgyny of his fellow-fugitive and the homosexual relationship between two young lovers in an Italian villa made this task even more difficult. Apparently, the analysis of concepts such as gender or sexual desire that were applied to the analysis of *Call Me by Your Name* would not work in the discussion of *The Left Hand of Darkness*.

However, the similarities between both texts and the homosocial/homosexual experience portrayed clearly outweigh the differences. The characters' status as outcasts, aliens and liars is perhaps the most important feature that both books share. As Adrienne Rich says in her discussion of the necessity of the homosexual individual to lie and remain inside the closet, "lying is done with words, and also with silence" (413). While Aciman studies the ways in

which Elio and Oliver express their homosexual desire for one another through their silences, ellipsis and gestures, Le Guin provides her novel with a mystery and an obscurity that turn the book into a game of masquerading, a power struggle in which allowing others to know your real identity means putting oneself at risk. Hiding and lying are means for the protagonists of *Call Me by Your Name* to pass as heterosexuals in a phallogocentric society that imposes specific patterns of gendered behavior on its individuals. The subjugation of women under the Law of the Father and the presence of the phallus seems to be a common element in both texts, with *Call Me by Your Name* presenting women as both threats and objects of desire that can be used as covers, whereas *The Left Hand of Darkness* uses the sexual ambiguity of the Gethenians to explore the perpetuation of normative masculinity and femininity through the misogynistic attitude of Genly Ai.

Though done in a different manner, both writers present their protagonists as transgressive inasmuch as the bonds they establish between each other defy social expectations. Besides, both texts present the idea that for the male homosexual individual to be able to be free, he needs to escape civilization. Genly Ai and Estraven's journey through the Ice works in the same way that Rome or Monet's *berm* do for Elio and Oliver. These places exist outside the phallogocentric version of reality created by patriarchal society, thus allowing the characters to come out of the closet for short periods of time. These havens also work as examples of how the characters are able to push the frontiers and the boundaries that try to closet their truth, overcoming the idea of a single, universal truth in favor of a multiplicity of truths that widen the way reality is decoded and apprehended. Nevertheless, these solutions are temporary, which forces the characters to look for other ways to create safe spots or simulations of reality in which they can be free and remain outside the closet.

The ultimate way for the protagonists of both novels to overcome the barriers that separates them is by becoming one with one another. In other words, *Call Me by Your Name* presents multiple ways in which Elio and Oliver manage to get inside one another in both physical and metaphysical ways. By exchanging their names, as well as bodily fluids, they manage to inscribe part of their own identity in the body of the other. *The Left Hand of Darkness* illustrates this possibility through Genly Ai's capacity to *mindspeak*, which allows him to get inside Estraven's mind and avoid *shifgrethor*, the set of rules that shapes Gethenian behavior and power dynamics.

Just like *shifgrethor* is avoided, the binary oppositions around which patriarchal society is built are at least challenged in most cases. *Call Me by Your Name* does not base Elio and Oliver's romance on dichotomies such as old/young, passive/active or expert/innocent, while Genly Ai manages to overcome his own prejudices against Estraven's physiological peculiarities by the end of the novel. Of course, neither of the texts succeed in overcoming every single dichotomy due to the flawed nature of most of their characters. The men are misogynistic and keep perpetuating the aforementioned standards of hegemonic heterosexuality, whereas the women define their identities in relation to men and are unable to empower themselves by rebelling against the phallogocentric language that dialectically closes them.

It is precisely the lack of a happy ending in both novels (Oliver gets married and returns to the United States whereas Estraven is murdered) that highlights important aspects of the homosexual experience such as the fact that no matter how much the characters fight and overcome their own barriers, social prejudices and stigmas are much harder to avoid. The research carried out by this paper aims to demonstrate that those social prejudices can indeed be overcome by means of the creation of more inclusive, intersectional and democratic readings of the homosexual experience. The aforementioned existence of a multiplicity of truths instead of a single, homogeneous truth, must play a significant role in the improvement of our understanding of the hardships and suffering of the homosexual individual's life.

Whereas social prejudices and the constant presence of a compulsory heterosexuality that must be respected at all costs remain the most important challenges that the LGBTQ community face, the erasure of misogynistic, exclusive and toxic behaviors such as the ones perpetuated by the characters throughout their respective novels must be the next step in the evolution of this specific field of study.

The fact that our analysis allows for further research to be carried out shows the endless possibilities that the study of the homosocial/homosexual continuum creates. We have already mentioned different works that have multiple similarities with both *Call Me by Your Name* and *The Left Hand of Darkness*. Works like Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood* (1936) or Gloria Naylor's 1982 novel *The Women of Brewster Place* would allow us to focus on the lesbian experience, the homosocial bonds and the sorority established between females and the role that the phallus plays in the subjugation of the female characters. Comparisons could also be made between *Nightwood* and *The Left Hand of Darkness* due to the study of gender that both novels produce.

Some characters in *Nightwood* are either cross-dressers or possess both masculine and feminine features, which could be compared to the physiological differences of the Gethenian population and its effect on Genly Ai's Westernized perspective.

If we were to analyze the homosocial/homosexual continuum and the coming out experience in male homosexuals in visual cultures, we could turn to Italian director Luca Guadagnino's adaptation of *Call Me by Your Name* that came out in 2017 and was written by James Ivory. The film approaches the Wildean concept of beauty and art in a different manner, focusing on Oliver's body rather than Elio's, and making comparisons between Greek and Roman sculptures and Oliver's beauty. Moreover, James Ivory has previously directed different adaptations of novels written by E.M. Forster and Henry James, which would allow for more analyses of the way male homosexuality is approached in both literature and visual cultures.

Further research could also be carried out in relation to masculinity studies and their influence on the LGBTQ experience. Writers such as Philip Roth, John Updike, Raymond Carver or Ernest Hemingway are usually mentioned in analyses of masculine behavior, although Sherman Alexie's collection of short stories *The Toughest Indian in the World* (2000) could perhaps work as an alternative way of approaching the process by which the male-male homosocial bond turns into a homosexual relationship, and the ways in which said evolution is prevented.

Finally, this paper has briefly discussed the dehumanization of the homosexual individual as a consequence of labelling same-sex desire as something evil or mad. The relation between madness and homosexuality could be further explored, especially if we were to analyze how madness represents transgression, whereas sanity is usually regarded as a way of being assimilated by society. We have already mentioned texts such as Allen Ginsberg's "Howl", but we could also add Ken Kesey's *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1962) as an example of the use of psychiatry and schizophrenia as a means to dehumanize the individual that challenges social conventions in terms of sexual orientation and gender.

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